

*Memories*  
*and*  
*Portraits*

*by*

IVAN BUNIN

17  
2



# MEMORIES AND PORTRAITS

**By the same Author:**  
**THE WELL OF DAYS**  
**DARK AVENUES**







*Left to right: Skitaletz, Leonid Andreev, Maxim Gorki,  
Teleshov, Chaliapin, Ivan Bunin and Chirikov (standing).*

*A Photograph taken in Moscow in 1902.*

IVAN BUNIN



# Memories and Portraits

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## Autobiographical Notes



THE ANCIENT and noble family from which I am descended has provided Russia with a fair number of distinguished men, not only in the service of state and army, but also in the world of art. In the latter connection two poets who lived at the beginning of last century achieved particular renown, namely Anna Bunin and Vassili Zhukovski, son of Athanase Bunin and the Turkish Salma, one of the leading figures of Russian literature.

All my forebears spent their lives in close harmony with the peasants and the soil: they were country gentlemen. Such was the case with my parents, who owned property in central Russia, in those fertile steppes round which the ancient Muscovite Tsars had erected a bulwark of colonies drawn from every province in the land, the better to protect them against forays from the Tartars of the south. It was here, as a result, that the richest of all Russian dialects was formed, and it was from this same district that almost all our great writers came, beginning with Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy.

I was born in 1870, at Voronezh. I spent my childhood and youth almost exclusively in the country, on my father's estates. In the course of my childhood I developed a passion for painting, and this, it seems to me, is evident

in my literary work. At an early age I began to write poetry and prose alike, and while I was still young my works achieved publication.

My life as a writer began rather strangely. I would say that it began on the day when I, a boy of about eight, was so astounded by a picture I saw in a book that I was seized by a sudden overwhelming urge to make up, then and there, something like a poem or a fairy-tale. The picture showed wild mountains, the white ribbon of a waterfall and a fat, stocky peasant standing under the waterfall with a long stick in his hand. He was a dwarf with a woman's face and a swollen neck (that is, with a goitre), wearing a small, rather feminine hat with a feather sticking out on one side. In the caption under the picture, one word, happily unknown to me until then, completely fascinated me. It read: "Meeting a cretin in the mountains." A cretin! Had that amazing word not been there, the dwarf with goitre and a woman's face would have seemed merely repulsive to me. But a cretin, what was a cretin? For me, the word had something mysterious, terrifying, almost magical. And it was then that I was seized with poetical ecstasy. That day, it's true, my ecstasy was wasted: I did not make up a single line, hard as I tried. But what of it? Should not that day, nevertheless, be counted as a kind of beginning of my writing?

In any case, it really looks as if there were something prophetic in my having come across that picture at the time, for in the course of my life I was destined to encounter quite a number of cretins. They were also rather repulsive in appearance, even if they had no goitres, and some of them, though in no way magicians, were definitely



frightening, particularly when their cretinism was combined with some great gift, with a sort of bedevilment, or with some hysterical force. This happens sometimes, as we know, and particularly in the field of politics.

The critics were not slow to single out my works. Subsequently, they gained prizes on several occasions, notably the highest award bestowed by the Russian Academy—the Pushkin Prize. Then, in 1909, this same Academy elected me to be one of the Twelve Honorary Academicians, who corresponded in rank to the “Immortals” of the French Academy and who included Leo Tolstoy among their number.

I had to wait a long time, however, before I acquired a certain repute. This was due to a number of reasons: I kept aloof from politics and never in my writings touched on anything connected with them; I belonged to no literary school, calling myself neither a Decadent, a Symbolist, a Romantic nor a Realist; I assumed no false mask and waved no gaudily-tinted banner. Now, during the years preceding the Revolution, a writer's fate often depended on his attitude. Did he set himself up in opposition to the regime? Did he come from “the people”? Had he been imprisoned or deported? Or did he take part in the rumpus, the “literary revolution” which, following the example of western Europe, was then taking place in Russia, hand in hand with the rapid growth of public life in the towns and the recently established popular press, with its new critics and new readers sprung from the youthful bourgeoisie and proletariat, both equally incompetent judges of artistic matters and avid for imagined novelties and startling sensations? Furthermore,

I rarely frequented literary circles, living mainly in the country and travelling widely, both in Russia and abroad: Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, the tropics. My interests were devoted to philosophical, religious, moral and historical problems.

In 1910 I published my novel *The Village*. This was the beginning of a whole series of works which gave an unvarnished picture of the Russian character and the Russian soul, with its bewildering complexity and chiaroscuro, from which an underlying note of tragedy is hardly ever absent. Amongst the Russian critics and intellectuals, who idealized the people because of certain conditions peculiar to Russian society and, more recently, out of pure ignorance or for political reasons, these "pitiless" books gave rise to passionate controversies and, in the long run, brought me what is known as fame. This success was further reinforced by later works.

During these years I felt my hand growing stronger day by day. Increasingly impatient and self-confident, the forces which had been accumulating and ripening within me over a long period demanded self-expression. But then war broke out, to be followed in my country by the Revolution. I was not among those who were caught unawares by these events, to be staggered by their dimensions and ferocity. Yet even so the reality surpassed anything one could possibly have expected.

No one can understand what the Russian Revolution degenerated into who did not witness it with his own eyes. It was an utterly intolerable spectacle for anybody who still nurtured the belief that man is created in God's image. Accordingly, all those who could or so desired

fled from Russia. Amongst the fugitives were the majority of the most famous Russian writers; they left for the prime reason that in Russia a futile death lay in wait for them at the hands of the first scoundrel they met, drunk with excess and impunity, with pillage, wine, blood and cocaine. Alternatively, they would have been reduced to all the humiliations of slavery, forced to dwell in the shadows, amongst the vermin, clothed in rags, beset with disease, exposed to cold and the ghastly pangs of hunger, brought so low that their one thought was to satisfy their stomachs, and perpetually threatened with the loss of the miserable hovel which sheltered them, with being arrested without cause, beaten and insulted, forced to witness the rape of their mothers, sisters or wives—and all this without being permitted one word in protest, for, in Russia at this time, they did not hesitate to cut out a man's tongue for the least independent expression of thought.

I left Moscow in May 1918, going to live in southern Russia, which was then seized in turn by the "Whites" and the "Reds". Finally I emigrated abroad in February 1920: I had drunk the cup of indescribable suffering and vain hope to the very dregs. I had believed too long that the Christian world would open its eyes, take fright at the violence of the holocaust and lend us a helping hand in the name of God, humanity and its own security.

## Leo Tolstoy



MY ADMIRATION for him began when I was hardly more than a child. Already as a boy I had built up a certain idea of him, not from reading his books but from conversations I heard at home. Among other things, I remember my father telling us with a laugh how some of our neighbours used to read *War and Peace*: some read only "War" and the others only "Peace", the first skipping everything to do with peace and the others doing the exact opposite. And my own feelings towards Tolstoy were not simple, even at that time.

My father used to say:

"I know him a little. We met several times during the Sebastopol campaign. . . ."

And I remember looking at him with awe and amazement: he had actually seen Tolstoy in the flesh!

Why did I feel like that about him when I had not yet read a single line of his work? But the mere fact that he was a writer was sufficient. A writer seemed a special kind of being to me, and aroused in me a strange, inexpressible feeling which I cannot define to this day, just as I cannot explain when, how and why I became a writer myself. I find these questions as impossible to answer as the question, when and how did I become the man I am? Later on, when it became quite clear to me that I was meant to

be a writer, life in books, in the world of poets and writers, became a second life for me, but there again I do not remember when I actually began reading Tolstoy and how I came to give him a different place from all the others.

It can happen that a man discovers something beautiful and precious quite suddenly, with surprise, but this did not happen to me with Tolstoy. I do not remember such a moment of surprise. Speaking generally, the beautiful things I encountered in my childhood or youth never surprised me; on the contrary, I always felt that I had known them for a long time, so that all that remained to me was to rejoice at having met them.

For many years I was really in love with Tolstoy, in love with the image I had created, and I yearned to see him in the flesh. It was a yearning which never left me—but what could I do? Go to Yasnaya Polyana? But what excuse could I find? What would I say when I got there? At last, on a bright summer day I could bear it no longer. I suddenly saddled my Kirghiz horse and made for Efremov, in the direction of Yasnaya Polyana, which was no more than eighty miles away from us. But after galloping all the way to Efremov I lost heart and decided to spend the night there and think things over. I was so excited that I kept awake all night, unable to make up my mind whether to go or not. I roamed through the town for hours and became so worn out that when at dawn I found myself in the public garden I sank down on the first bench I could find and fell into a heavy sleep. When I woke up and sobered down completely I once more thought the matter over and galloped back home, where the workmen said to me:

"In God's name, master, how did you manage to get the Kirghiz into this state in one night? Who is it you were chasing?"

After that I "chased" Tolstoy in vain for several years.

At that time I dreamed of a pure, healthy, kindly life close to nature, where, dressed in simple clothes, I would earn my daily bread with hard manual work and live in brotherly friendship not only with the poor and the oppressed but with the whole vegetable and animal world. All this, but mainly my adoration for Tolstoy as an artist, made me a Tolstoyan, not without the secret hope, it is true, that this would at last give me a legitimate reason to meet him and perhaps even become a member of his circle. So started my Tolstoyan novitiate.

I lived at the time in Poltava, where for some reason there were quite a number of Tolstoyans with whom I very soon became acquainted. On the whole, they were an insufferable crowd, but I suffered them bravely. The first one I came to know was a certain Mr. Klopski,\* who was fairly well known in some circles and was even taken by the writer Karonin as the hero for his much publicized story, "The Teacher of Life". He was a tall, lean man in high boots and a Russian blouse, with a narrow, grey face and turquoise eyes, a cunning bounder and a crook, and an indefatigable talker always ready to preach and moralize. He liked to shock people with his eccentricities and rudeness but managed nevertheless to lead a gay and comfortable life at other people's expense in one place or another. Among the Poltava Tolstoyans was also a Dr. Wolkenstein, a grand seigneur by birth and nature, in some ways rather like Stiva Oblonski in *Anna Karenina*.

Klopski, on his arrival in Poltava, made his way straight to Wolkenstein, who introduced him partly for the sake of the "cause" as a preacher, and partly for entertainment purposes as an amusing type, into the Poltava salons where Klopski used to hold forth in the following manner:

"Oh yes, I see the sort of life you lead: it's all pretence and cant washed down with sweet liqueur, and pious hymns to idols, in churches that should have been blown up ages ago. When shall we see the end of all the nonsense and abominations into which the world is sunk? For instance, there I was, travelling from Kharkov. A man called for some reason a conductor passes along the train and says, 'Your ticket, please.' I ask him, 'What exactly do you mean by ticket?' He says, 'Well, the ticket you're travelling with.' So I keep on: 'Look here, I'm not travelling with a ticket, I'm travelling with a train.'—'D'you mean to say you haven't got a ticket?'—'Exactly,' I reply. 'I mean just that.'—'Then we'll make you get out at the next station.'—'That's your concern,' I say. 'Mine is to continue my journey.' At the next station they appear: 'Please to leave the train.'—'Why should I?' I retort. 'I am quite happy here.'—'Very well, then, we'll have to make you.'—'But what if I refuse to move?'—'We'll drag you out, we'll carry you.'—'Go right ahead.' So they proceeded to drag me out—two great big clods, two hefty fellows who'd have been better occupied ploughing a field—carrying me in their arms, to the astonishment of a crowd of respectable citizens."

Such was Klopski, a man of a certain repute. The others had no claim to fame, but were not very different. There were two brothers D. who had settled down as

farmers near Poltava, remarkably boring, slow-minded and conceited people, though very humble at first glance. Then there was a certain Leontiev, a weedy little young man with a delicate face of rare beauty, educated at the Corps des Pages, who tortured himself by working as a moujik, lying to himself and everybody else, pretending that it made him very happy. There was also an enormous Jew who looked like a burly Russian peasant and later became known under the name of Tenoromo; he affected a pompous and patronizing manner towards all ordinary mortals and was an unbearable rhetorician and sophist; his particular type of work was coopering. My first steps were taken under his tuition. He was my main guide both in the "teaching" and in manual labour. I was his underling and learnt to make hoops. What did I need these hoops for? But, again, they seemed to create a link with Tolstoy and gave me the secret hope of seeing him and getting close to him.

To my infinite joy this hope was suddenly and quite unexpectedly realized. Very soon the brotherhood accepted me as one of them, and Wolkenstein—it was at the very end of 1893—invited me to go with him on a visit to the "brethren" of the Kharkov district, who were the peasants of the village Khilkovo which belonged to Prince Khilkov, a well-known Tolstoyan. After that we were to go on to Moscow to see Tolstoy himself.

It was a most uncomfortable journey. We travelled third class, changed several times, every time deliberately picking on the carriages with the humblest passengers, and ate "unslaughtered" food, i.e. goodness knows what—though every now and again Wolkenstein felt he could



bear it no longer and rushed to the refreshment room where he gulped down two or three glasses of vodka and burned his mouth with hot meat-pies. After that he used to say to me very earnestly: "Again I've given way to lust and I suffer from it greatly, but I don't give up the struggle, and besides I know that meat-pies have no power over me any more; on the contrary, it's I who have power over them. I'm not their slave, I eat them if I want to and I don't if I don't want to."

What made the journey seem even worse was that I was boiling with impatience to reach Moscow as quickly as possible. But no, we had to take the slowest trains, then stay for a while with the Khilkovo "brethren" to establish with them a relationship that would strengthen both them and ourselves in living our "good" life. So we did stay, I believe, three or four days with the Khilkovo peasants, and during that time I came to loathe these wealthy, pious, saintly-looking people, the nights spent in their huts, their pies with potato stuffing, their psalm-singing, their endless tales of a relentless struggle with "popes and governors" and their hair-splitting arguments on the Scriptures.

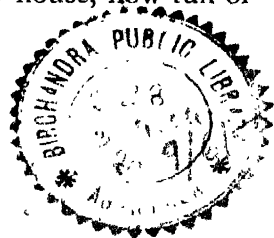
At last, on the 1st of January, we moved on. I remember waking up that morning with such joy in my heart that I completely forgot myself and shouted: "Happy New Year, Alexander Alexandrovich!" I received a furious telling-off: what did I mean by wishing him a happy new year, didn't I realize what hackneyed rubbish I was saying, and so on. However, I remained quite unaffected, for as I listened I was saying to myself: "All right, all right, all this may well be rubbish, but

tomorrow night we'll be in Moscow, and the day after tomorrow I shall see Tolstoy. . . ." And so it was to be.

To begin with, Wolkenstein played a mean trick on me: the minute we reached our Moscow hotel he went off to see Tolstoy, but refused to take me with him. "I really can't," he said, "I must give him some warning. But I'll tell him about you, I promise." And he rushed out.

He returned very late and did not even give me an account of his visit but just shouted excitedly: "It's as though I had taken a draught of holy water"—though I could easily establish by the smell of his breath that after the holy water he had had some Chambertin, in order, no doubt, to prove that he was not a slave of that drink but the other way round. The only good thing was that he had kept his promise and had told Tolstoy about my proposed visit, which was actually more than I had hoped for: he was charming, that handsome, plump, slightly feminine, dark-haired man, but very unreliable. The next evening, quite beyond myself, I rushed off to Khamovniki at last.

How can I tell all that followed? It was a frosty, moonlit night. I ran all the way, and when I arrived I was hardly able to breathe. Everything was still and desolate: the moonlit, empty little street, the portals in front of me, the open gate, the snow-covered yard. Beyond it, to the left, stood a wooden house with a reddish light in some of the windows; further to the left, behind the house, was a garden and above it fairy-like wintry stars shimmered softly. Everything, indeed, was like a fairy-tale. What a strange garden, what an extraordinary house, how full of



mystery and meaning these lighted windows—for behind them there was HE! The stillness around me was such that I could hear my heart beating—from joy, but also from the terrifying thought: hadn't I better take just one more glance at the house and run back? At last I desperately plunged into the yard, ran up the steps of the porch and rang the bell. The door was opened at once. I saw a footman in a shabby tail-coat, a bright cosy entrance, a multitude of fur coats on the hangers, and among them, in striking contrast to the others, an old sheepskin coat. In front of me was a circular staircase covered with a red carpet. Under it, in the right-hand corner, was a closed door behind which I could hear the sound of a guitar and gay young voices, astonishingly untroubled by the fact that they were resounding in such a truly extraordinary house.

"Whom shall I announce?"

"Bunin."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Bunin."

"Very well, sir."

The footman ran upstairs and, to my surprise, came sauntering back almost at once, sideways, holding to the banisters.

"Will you kindly wait upstairs in the ballroom."

In the ballroom—another surprise, for the moment I entered a small door opened at the end and I saw someone rise up (for behind the door there were two or three steps leading down into a passage), quickly throwing his feet forward with a kind of clumsy dexterity—a large grey-bearded figure, slightly bandy-legged, in a wide, baggy

blouse of grey flannel, grey trousers of the same material that looked more like bloomers, and square-toed shoes. Swift and light, frightening, sharp-eyed, with frowning eyebrows, he moved straight at me, but I had time to notice in his walk, in his whole bearing, something that reminded me of my father. With a quick, slightly bobbing gait he came up close to me, stretched out, or more precisely threw out, a large hand, palm upwards, enveloping mine, softly pressed it, and suddenly smiled. The smile was enchanting, tender and at the same time somewhat sorrowful, almost pathetic, and I saw now that the small eyes were neither frightening nor sharp but just alert like an animal's. The downy remnants of his grey hair curling slightly at the ends were divided in a straight parting, peasant fashion; the very large ears were set unusually high; the bulges of the brows were drawn low over the eyes; the beard—dry, flimsy, uneven, transparent—did not hide the outline of the slightly protruding lower jaw.

"Bunin? Was it your father I knew in the Crimea? Have you come to Moscow for long? What for? To see me? A young writer, are you? Well, certainly, go on writing if you feel like it, but remember that it can never be the aim of life. . . . Please sit down and tell me about yourself. . . ."

He spoke as hastily as he walked, pretending not to notice my complete discomfiture, eager to help me out and put me at my ease. What else did he say? He kept asking questions: "Married? Single? One can only live with a woman as a wife and never leave her. . . . You wish to lead a simple life and work on the land? That's a

very good thing but don't force yourself, don't make a uniform of it, one can be a good man in any kind of life. . . ."

We sat at a small table on which a tallish porcelain lamp burnt with a mellow light under a pink lampshade. His face was behind the lamp, in a soft shadow, and all I could see was the grey flannel of his blouse, and his large hand to which I longed to press my lips with ecstatic, truly filial tenderness. I listened to his aged, slightly high-pitched voice with the characteristic sound coming from a somewhat protruding jaw. . . . Suddenly I heard the rustle of silk. I looked up and jumped to my feet: a portly, elegant woman in a dress of shiny black silk, with beautifully set hair and lively eyes, so dark that the pupils did not show, glided in from the drawing-room.

"Léon," she said, "you've forgotten that there's somebody waiting for you."

He rose with an apologetic, almost guilty smile, his eyebrows raised, and looked straight into my face with his small eyes in which a dark sorrow seemed always to be buried.

"Well, au revoir, God bless you," he said, once more grasping my hand in his. "Come and see me again when you are in Moscow. . . . Don't expect too much from life, you'll never have a better time than you are having now. There is no happiness in life, there are only occasional flares of it. You must learn to appreciate them, to live on them. . . ."

I left him and ran home quite beyond myself, and passed a completely mad night, seeing him all the time in my dreams with such unbelievable vividness and in such

wild confusion that even now I shudder to remember it, and waking up to find myself raving and jabbering.

I wrote to him from Poltava and received several affectionate letters in reply. In one of them he intimated again that it was not really worth my while trying so hard to live as a Tolstoyan, but I was not to be put off. I stopped making hoops but took up an illegal activity instead: I sold books published by the Tolstoyan firm "Posrednik" ("The Mediator") at fairs and market-places, without having a proper licence for selling them, as a result of which I was arrested and sentenced to a term of imprisonment, but was saved from it, to my great distress, by a manifesto of the Tsar. After that I opened a bookshop, a Poltava branch of "Posrednik", and made such a mess of the accounts that at times I felt like hanging myself. Finally I simply abandoned the shop to its fate and moved to Moscow, where I went on trying to convince myself that I was a "brother", a co-disciple of the editors of "Posrednik" and of the people who were hanging around the place, instructing each other in the "good" life. I saw Tolstoy there several times. He dropped in, or, more precisely, he rushed in (for he had an extraordinarily light and quick walk), in the evenings and would stay there for an hour or two, without taking off his sheepskin coat, surrounded on all sides by the "brethren", who would quite seriously put questions to him like the following: "Lev Nikolaevich, what ought I to do if I were attacked by a tiger?" On occasions like this he would say with an embarrassed smile: "But why a tiger? Where do you find tigers? I've never seen a tiger in the whole of my life."

I remember once saying to him, in an attempt to make myself agreeable and get into his good graces:

"Temperance societies are now springing up everywhere."

He frowned slightly:

"What societies?"

"Temperance societies. . . ."

"You mean, when people meet in order not to drink vodka? What rubbish. There is no need to meet in order not to drink. But if you *have* to meet, then you had better drink. What nonsense all this is, what a deceit, what substitution for action of the semblance of action. . . ."

I saw him at his home once more. I was led across the ballroom, where I once sat with him by the pink lamp, through the little door and down the steps into a narrow passage, where I timidly knocked at the door on my right.

"Come in," answered the aged, high-pitched voice.

I entered and saw a small, low room darkened by an iron shield placed around two burning candles in an antique candlestick, a leather sofa by the table on which the candlestick was standing, and finally himself, with a book in his hand. As I entered, he rose abruptly and with an awkward and, it seemed to me, an embarrassed gesture threw the book into the corner of the sofa. But I had sharp eyes and I was able to see that he had been reading, that is, re-reading (and very likely not for the first time, as all we authors do), his own work, *The Master and the Workman*, which had just come out. In my admiration for the book, I was tactless enough to pay it an enthusiastic compliment. He flushed and waved his hands at me.

"Please don't mention it! It's dreadful, it's so mediocre that I'm ashamed to show myself in the street."

His face that evening was drawn, dark and stern, as though cast in bronze. He had suffered a great deal those days—only recently his seven-year-old son, Vania, had died. After the mention of *The Master and the Workman* he immediately began to talk about him.

"Yes, he was a charming, a sweet boy. But why say he is dead? There is no death, he is not dead, he lives in us because we love him."

We soon left the house and went to the "Posrednik" office. It was a black night in March, a spring wind was blowing and kindling the lights of the street lamps. We ran very fast across the snow-white Maidens' Field; he jumped over the ditches so quickly that I could hardly keep pace with him, and kept repeating sternly and abruptly:

"There is no death, there is no death!"

About ten years later I saw him for the last time. On a terribly cold night, walking along the Arbat among the dazzling lights in the ice-covered shop windows, I suddenly bumped into him running straight at me with his springy, sauntering step. I stopped and pulled off my cap. He stopped too and recognized me at once.

"Ah, it's you! How do you do? Please put on your cap. . . . How and where do you live, what are you doing?"

His aged face was so stiff and blue with cold that he looked pitiful. The knitted pale-blue thing that he was wearing on his head looked like an old woman's cowl. The large hand which he pulled out of a pale-blue woollen glove



LEO TOLSTOY

was as cold as ice. After a few words he shook my hand firmly and affectionately, and again looked sorrowfully into my eyes, with lifted brows.

“Well, Christ be with you, Christ be with you. Good-bye!”

## Chekhov



### I

I MET HIM for the first time in Moscow, at the end of 1895. A few characteristic phrases of his have remained fixed in my memory to this day.

"Do you write a lot?" he asked me.

I replied that I did not.

"What a shame," he said glumly, in his deep chest-voice. "You must work, you know. You must work without stopping. . . . All your life." Then, after a pause, he added without any apparent connection: "I think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end. That's where we, fiction writers, mostly go wrong. And one should be brief, as brief as possible. . . ."

When our conversation turned to poetry he suddenly livened up.

"And what about Alexei Tolstoy? Do you like his verse? I think he's an actor. He put on an opera cloak in his youth and has kept it on ever since."

After our meeting in Moscow I did not see him again till the spring of 1899. I went to Yalta for a few days, and met him one evening on the quay.

"Why don't you come and see me?" he said. "You must come to-morrow."

"At what time?"

"Come in the morning, at about seven."

Probably noticing that I was somewhat startled, he explained:

"We get up early. Do you?"

"Yes, I do too."

"Well, that's all right, then. Come as soon as you're ready. We'll have coffee together. One should always drink coffee in the morning, not tea. It's wonderful. When I am working I have nothing till evening except coffee and bouillon."

We walked in silence along the quay and sat down on a bench in the square.

"Do you like the sea?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Only it's so empty."

"That's the best thing about it," I said.

"I don't know. . . ." he said, gazing into the distance, apparently absorbed in his own thoughts. "I think it must be nice to be an officer, or a young student. To sit in some crowded place and listen to gay music. . . ."

And after a pause he added in his characteristic manner, without any visible connection:

"The sea is difficult to describe. Do you know the description I read the other day, in a schoolboy's exercise book? 'The sea was big.' That was all it said. I found it wonderful."

In Moscow I had met a middle-aged man, tall, slim and light in his movements. At our first meeting he had been friendly, but so simple in his manner that I mistook that simplicity for coldness. In Yalta I found him changed: he had grown thinner, his face had darkened, his move-

ments were slower and his voice sounded more hollow. But on the whole he was almost the same: friendly, but still reserved. His manner was quite lively, but he spoke even more simply and briefly than before, and all the time, with his face slightly turned upward, he seemed to be thinking about something else, leaving it to his companion to follow the changing course of the hidden current of his thoughts.

The day after our meeting on the quay I went to his house. I well remember the sunny morning we spent in his little garden. After that day I visited him more and more often, and soon became like a member of the household. His attitude to me altered accordingly: it grew warmer, though the reserve remained. That was noticeable in his manner not only towards me but also towards the people who were closest to him, although, as I understood later on, it did not denote coldness: it was merely consistent self-restraint.

The white stone house in Autka, the little garden which he, always fond of flowers, cultivated with such care, the trees, the study with its walls quite bare except for two or three landscapes by Levitan, the large semi-circular window overlooking the Uchan-Su valley drowned in orchards, and the blue triangle of the sea, the hours, days and sometimes months I spent there will remain for ever among my dearest memories.



He burst into his infectious laughter only when somebody else said something amusing. He himself said the

funniest things without a flicker of a smile. He loved jokes, absurd nicknames, hoaxes of any kind. Even in the last years of his life, as soon as he felt at all better, he was inexhaustible in these things. But he never overstressed anything—with a mischievous twinkle of his eyes over his pince-nez, he would just put in a word or two.

His self-restraint was evident in everything. Who, for example, ever heard him complain? Yet he had many grounds for complaint. Being one of a large family which at the time was very badly off, he began work very young. He earned next to nothing and remained hard up for a long time. Yet nobody ever heard him lament over his fate, and this was not because his requirements were limited. He loathed drabness and poverty. For fifteen years he suffered from an exhausting illness. And yet did his readers—the Russian readers who had heard so many writers' lamentations—know anything about it? Even in his home, on the days when he suffered most pain, no one suspected anything.

"Aren't you feeling well, Antosha?" his mother or sister would ask, seeing him sit all day in his armchair, with his eyes closed.

"I?" he would say quietly, opening his eyes, so meek without their pince-nez. "No, I'm all right. Just a slight headache."



He admired Maupassant and Tolstoy. He spoke particularly often about them, and also about Lermontov's *Taman*.

"What beats me," he would say, "is that he was able to write it when he was still a mere boy. Ah, if I could write something like that, and perhaps a good vaudeville as well, I'd die in peace!"

He often said:

"One shouldn't ever read one's writing before it's printed. Nor should one ever take other people's advice. All right—you've gone wrong somewhere, you've made a mistake—but let the mistake be your own. In work one has to have daring. There are big dogs and small dogs, and the small ones need not be put out by the existence of the big ones. All of them have a duty to bark—to bark with whatever voice God has given them."

It is said about nearly every writer after his death that he rejoiced in other people's triumphs, that he was free of vanity. But in Chekhov's case it was true. He did rejoice at every sign of talent, and could not help rejoicing. The word "untalented", I think, was the worst insult on his lips. Yet he felt somewhat bitter about his own successes.

"Well, Anton Pavlovich, soon we'll be celebrating your silver jubilee."

"Ah, I know all about these jubilees. For twenty-five years they tear a man to shreds, and then they come and present him with a quill-pen made of aluminium, and spend the entire day going into raptures, shedding tears and smothering him with kisses."

"Have you read it?" I would ask, having seen an article about him somewhere.

He would glance at me from the corner of his eye, above his pince-nez.

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"Thank you very much. They go and write a thousand lines about somebody else, and then add at the very bottom: 'There also exists another writer, Chekhov: the one who keeps moaning.' And yet, have you ever heard me moan? Am I 'gloomy', or 'cold-blooded', as the critics call me? I—a pessimist? But do you know that of all my stories the one I like best is 'The Student'? The word itself is sickening—'pessimist'. . . ."

Occasionally, he would add to that:

"Whenever, my dear sir, someone abuses you, remember me, your servant: I got a thrashing for the slightest slip, like the chaps at the seminary. One critic prophesied that I would die in the gutter: he imagines me as a young man who's been kicked out of secondary school for drinking too much."



"You should only sit down to write when you feel as cold as ice," he once said.



"The 'Scorpion's' publicity is careless," he wrote to me after the first issue of the *Flowers of the North*. "They put me on top, and when I saw their advertisement in the *Russian Chronicle*, I swore I'd have nothing more to do with any scorpions or crocodiles or grass-snakes."

I had persuaded him to send one of his early stories ("On the Sea") to the "Scorpion's" *Almanach*. Later on he regretted it.

"No, all this 'new art' in Moscow is rubbish," he said. "I remember I once saw a signboard in Taganrog: 'Establishment of Artificial Mineral Waters.' That's what it is. Only what is talented can be new. What's talented *is* new."

One of my last memories of him refers to early spring 1903: Yalta, the Hotel Russia, late evening. Suddenly I was called to the telephone. I went and heard:

"Dear sir, find a good cab and come and fetch me. We'll go out for a ride."

"A ride? At night? What's the matter with you, Anton Pavlovich?"

"I'm in love."

"That's excellent. But it's gone nine. Besides, you might catch cold."

"Young man, don't argue."

Ten minutes later I was in Autka. The house, where in the winter he lived alone with his mother, was quiet and dark as usual. The study was dimly lit by two candles. And, as usual, my heart ached at the sight of that room where he spent so many lonely winter evenings.

"A wonderful night," he said with surprising softness and a kind of wistful joy. "And it's so dull at home. The only distraction I get is when the telephone rattles and somebody wants to know what I'm doing and I say, 'I'm catching mice.' Let's drive to Orianda."

The night was calm and warm, with a clear moon and light clouds. The carriage drove along the white high road. We kept silent, looking at the brilliant plain of the sea. Then came the wood, with a light pattern of shadows;



after that, black crowds of cypresses rose towards the stars. We got out of the carriage and slowly walked under them. As we were going past the ruins of the palace, pale-blue in the moonlight, he suddenly stopped and said:

"Do you know how many years people will go on reading me? Seven."

"Why seven?"

"Well, seven and a half."

"You're sad to-day, Anton Pavlovich," I said, looking into his face, very pale in the moonlight.

He was looking down, thoughtfully digging the end of his walking-stick into the gravel; but when I said that he was sad he glanced at me mischievously.

"It's you who are sad," he said. "You're sad because you've spent some money on a cab." Then he added in a serious tone: "Nevertheless, they'll read me only for seven years, and I have even less to live: six years. But don't tell the Odessa reporters about that."

Here he was particularly mistaken: he lived not for six years, but just over one year.



In January, when I was in Nice, I received one of his last letters:

"Good day, dear I.A.<sup>1</sup> I wish you a happy New Year. I got your letter. Thanks. Here in Moscow all is well. There's nothing new (except the New Year), and nothing new is in view. My play has not been put on yet, and nobody knows when it will be put on. I may well come to Nice in February. Give my greetings to the dear warm

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sun, to the quiet sea. Enjoy yourself, have a good time, write often to your friends. . . . Keep well and cheerful and don't forget your stormy northern fellow-countrymen who are suffering from indigestion and bad temper. I kiss you and embrace you."

### II

He said, unexpectedly as usual:

"Do you know what happened to me once?" And, peering into my face through his pince-nez, he burst out laughing. "You see, I was going up the main stairs of the Moscow Assembly of the Nobility, and there, in front of the mirror, his back to me, stood Uzhin-Sumbatov, holding Potapenko by a coat-button and saying insistently: 'Do understand—you are now the first, the very first writer in Russia.' Suddenly he caught sight of me in the mirror, blushed and said quickly, pointing at me over his shoulder: 'And so is he.'"



Strange as it may seem to many, he disliked actors and actresses. He used to say about them:

"Compared to the rest of Russian society, they are seventy-five years out of date. They're cheap, and eaten up with vanity. Take Solovtsov, for instance . . .";

"Wait," I interrupted. "Don't you remember the telegram you sent to the Solovtsov Theatre after his death?"

"Ah, but what doesn't one have to write in telegrams and letters! What doesn't one have to say sometimes just to spare people's feelings!"

And then, after a pause, with a new burst of laughter:  
 "And then, look at the Arts Theatre, too. . . ."



His notebook contains a few things I heard him say myself. For example, he asked me several times, each time forgetting that he had said it before, and each time laughing heartily:

"Listen, do you know the type of lady who looks as if she had giil. under her corsage?"

I also heard him say, more than once:

"In nature a repulsive caterpillar turns into a lovely butterfly. But with human beings it's the other way round: a lovely butterfly turns into a repulsive caterpillar."

"When a bad actress eats a partridge, I feel sorry for the partridge, which had a hundred times more brains and talent than the actress."

"No matter how much people rave about her, Savina as an actress had the same standard as Victor Krylov as a playwright."

Sometimes he said:

"A writer should be as poor as a beggar. He should know that he will die of hunger if he doesn't write, if he allows his laziness to get the better of him. Writers should be put in prison and forced to write by any means: solitary confinement, flogging, birching. . . Oh, how grateful I

am to fate for having made me poor when I was young! I so admired Davydova! Mamin-Sibiryak would come to her: 'I haven't a kopek! Please give me five roubles at least in advance'—'Not if you were dying of starvation, my friend. I'll give you money on one condition only: if you agree that I should lock you up in my study, here and now, provide you with a pen and ink and paper and three bottles of beer, and keep you there until you knock and say through the door that you have a story ready.' "

But sometimes he spoke quite differently:

"A writer should be fabulously rich—so rich that at any moment he would be able to start on a journey round the world in his own yacht, or set up an expedition to the sources of the Nile, to the South Pole, to Tibet or to Arabia, and buy up the entire Caucasus or the Himalayas. Tolstoy says that all a man needs is three square yards of earth. Nonsense! Three square yards is enough for a corpse, but a living man needs the whole globe. Especially if he's a writer."

Speaking of Tolstoy, he once said:

"What impresses me particularly about him is the contempt he has for all of us, the other writers—or more exactly, he doesn't even feel any contempt, but simply considers that we are just nothing at all. Sometimes, for instance, he praises Maupassant, Kuprin, Semenov or myself. But why does he praise us? Because he looks upon us as children. For him, our short stories and novels are nothing but child's play, so, on the whole, he takes the same view of Maupassant and of Semenov. But if you take Shakespeare—that's quite another matter. That one

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was grown-up, and so it irritates him that he wrote in an un-Tolstoyan manner. . . ."



One day he looked up from a newspaper and said unhurriedly, without any intonation:

"It's all the time like that: Korolenko and Chekhov, Potapenko and Chekhov, Gorki and Chekhov. . . ."

Now he has been set apart. But it seems to me that he has not yet been completely understood: he was too complex and original a man, with a shy, reticent heart.

His notebook contains a remarkable line:

"Just as I shall lie alone in my grave, so, really, I am living alone."

The same notebook has the following remarks:

"How willing people are to be deceived, how fond they are of oracles, what a herd they are. . . ."

"To one clever man there are a thousand fools, to one intelligent word—a thousand stupid ones, and those drown everything."

His own voice was drowned for a long time. Before the appearance of "The Peasants"—by no means the best he had written—the public read him willingly enough, but he was for them no more than an entertaining storyteller, the author of "A Game of Vint" and "The Book of Complaints". Intellectuals with an "ideology", had, on the whole, little interest in him. They recognized his talent but did not take him seriously. I remember some of them being heartily amused when I, a mere youth, dared compare him to Korolenko and Garshin; some even

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said that they refused to read a man who began to write under the name of "Chekhonte". "Can you imagine," they said, "Turgenev or Tolstoy ever choosing such an undignified nickname for themselves?" In literary circles the attitude towards him was different, and many critics judged him highly, but never without some reservations.

Real fame came to him only when the Arts Theatre put on his plays, and this must have hurt him as much as the fact that he began to be spoken of at all only after the appearance of "The Peasants". His plays, again, were certainly not the best things he ever wrote, and, besides, their success meant that it was the theatre that attracted the public attention to him—the fact that his name was seen a thousand times on posters, that one remembered "Twenty-two misfortunes", "Oh, highly-esteemed cupboard", or "A man has been forgotten".

He often said:

"What sort of playwrights are we? The only real dramatic playwright is Naydenov: a born dramatist, with the most genuine dramatic spring inside of him. Now he must write another ten plays, of which nine will flop but the tenth will again be such a triumph that we'll all gasp."

And after a short pause he'd break again into peals of laughter:

"You know, I've just been to Gaspra to see Tolstoy. He is still ill in bed, but he spoke a lot about all sorts of things, including me. When at last I got up to say good-bye he kept my hand in his and said: 'Kiss me!' I bent down to kiss him and he suddenly leant close to my ear and said in his brisk, old-man's voice: 'I still can't abide

your plays, you know. Shakespeare wrote badly, but you're even worse.'"

I thought at the time, and I still think, that he ought never to have written about the nobility, their country estates and so forth: he did not know them well enough. This was particularly noticeable in his plays—in *Uncle Vanya* or *The Cherry Orchard*. The noble landowners in them are very false. The heroine of *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, supposed to have been born in that class, does not belong to it by a single trait: she is an actress, written with the sole purpose of giving a part to Olga Knipper. Firs is as cliché as can be, and his phrase, "A man has been forgotten", is a typical curtain line. Besides, where did he find such enormous gardens consisting entirely of cherry trees? "Cherry orchards" existed only in Ukrainian villages, where the peasants planted them behind their huts. Another question: why did Lopakhin have to cut down that "cherry orchard"? Surely, he could not have intended to build a factory in its place.



For a long time Chekhov was never qualified by any epithets other than "gloomy", "morbid", "the singer of twilight moods", a man who looks at everything in life hopelessly and indifferently. Present-day critics have swung to the other extreme: "Chekhovian melancholy, tenderness, warmth . . .", "Chekhov's love for humanity". . . I can imagine how he would feel if he could read about his tenderness. And he would be even more shocked at "warmth" and "melancholy".

Speaking of him, even talented people often strike the wrong note. For example, Elpatyevsky wrote: "In Chokhov's house I have met kind and soft, unassuming, unexacting people. He was attracted to them. . . . He always felt an attraction for quiet, misty valleys, for hazy dreams and silent tears. . . ." Korolenko speaks of his talent in such poor words as "simplicity and soulfulness", and attributes to him "a wistfulness for phantoms". One of the best articles about him was written by Leo Shestov, who says that he had "a pitiless talent".



Even in everyday life, he used words with precision and economy. He valued words very highly. He could not bear pompous, false, bookish words. His own speech was beautiful—fresh, clear and to the point. In his way of talking one never heard the writer; he seldom used similes or epithets, and when he did they were usually quite commonplace; he never flaunted or relished a well-chosen word. "Big" words he loathed. A book of memoirs about him contains a noteworthy passage: "I once complained to Anton Pavlovich: 'What am I to do? I am consumed by self-analysis.' And he replied: 'You ought to drink less vodka.'"

It was probably owing to that hatred of the "big" words, the words used in the careless, slapdash manner characteristic of many versifiers, modern ones in particular, that poetry so seldom satisfied him.

"This is worth the whole of Urenius," he once said, speaking of Lermontov's "The Sail".



"Urenius?"

"Why, isn't there such a poet?"

"No," I said.

"Well, then, Uprudius," he said gravely.



"You'll see, when Tolstoy dies, everything will go to the dogs."

"You mean literature?"

"Everything. Including literature."



About the Moscow "decadents", as they were called, he said:

"Decadents my eye. They're hefty moujiks. They ought to be put in a chain gang."



It sometimes happened that people of quite different social ranks would gather in his house. He was the same with everybody, he did not show any preferences, never made anybody's pride suffer; nobody felt forgotten or unwanted. But at the same time he kept everybody at a certain distance.

He had a great sense of dignity, of independence.

"Tolstoy is the only man I'm afraid of. Just think, it was he who wrote about Anna Karenina that she felt she saw her own eyes shining in the dark!"

"Seriously, I'm afraid of him," he would say again with a laugh, as though he enjoyed his fear.

Once, when he was going to visit Tolstoy, he spent nearly an hour making up his mind what trousers he would wear. He took off his pince-nez, which made him look years younger, and half serious and half laughing, as was usual with him, he kept coming out of his bedroom with a different pair of trousers on.

"No, these are indecently narrow. He'll say, what a pen-pusher!"

And he would go out, put on another pair and again come out laughing:

"But these are as wide as the Black Sea. He'll think, what a bounder!"



One day, accompanied by a few intimate friends, he went to Alupka to lunch in a restaurant. He was very cheerful and joked a lot. Suddenly, at an adjoining table, a man rose to his feet, holding a champagne-glass in his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us drink to the health of Anton Pavlovich who is here among us—the glory of our literature, the singer of twilight moods. . . ."

He went pale and walked out of the restaurant. And later on he often told me the story with indignation.



I stayed in Yalta for long periods, and spent nearly all my time with him. Often I left only late at night, and he would say, "Come early to-morrow morning."



He lisped at some sounds, he had a hollow voice and often spoke in a kind of toneless mutter. At times it was hard to tell whether he was in earnest or not. I for one gave up trying to guess. He would take off his pince-nez, press his hand to his heart, and say over and over again, carefully enunciating every word, with a barely perceptible smile on his pale lips:

"I beg you most insistently, monsieur le Marquis Bookishon—if ever you get bored with the forgotten old writer, stay all the same, for the sake of Mash<sup>1</sup>, Mamasha,<sup>1</sup> my wife, the Hungarian woman Knipshitz, who is in love with you. . . . We'll discuss literature together."

Sometimes we stayed all morning in his study, in complete silence, glancing through the newspapers which he received in great numbers. He would say:

"Let's read the provincial gossip columns and try and fish out some plots for dramas and vaudevilles."

Occasionally we would come across some—for the most part very unintelligent—comments about me, and he would hasten to soften the blow for me:

"Believe me, they've said even sillier things about me, much more cruel things, too, or else they've kept completely silent."

On one occasion, a critic detected a 'Chekhovian

<sup>1</sup> Muminy

mood" in me. He became quite agitated and exclaimed with a kind of restrained excitement:

"Oh, how stupid this is, how stupid! For my part; you know, I've been pestered with 'Turgenevian notes'. You and I are about as much alike as a borzoi and a bloodhound. For one thing, you're much sharper than I. For instance, you've written: 'The sea smelled of water-melon.' That's wonderful, but I wouldn't have said it. The girl-student, of course, that's a different matter. . . ."

"What girl-student?"

"Don't you remember, we were making up a story, you and I: a blazing hot day, the steppe beyond Kharkov, a long mail-train. . . . And you added: 'A girl-student with a leather belt stands by the window of a third-class carriage shaking wet tea-leaves out of a tea-pot; the tea-leaves carried away by the wind hit the face of a fat man who is leaning out of another carriage. . . .'"

Once he put down the paper, took off his pince-nez and burst into a peal of quiet, delighted laughter.

"What is it this time?" I asked him.

"A merchant from Samara by the name of Babkin," he said in a weak voice through his laughter, "bequeathed his entire fortune for the erection of a monument to Hegel."

"You're joking."

"Cross my heart. To Hegel."

Another time he suddenly dropped his paper and asked:

"What'll you write about me in your memoirs?"

"It's you who'll be writing about me. You'll outlive me."

"But you could be my son."

"All the same—you have peasant blood."

"But you have noble blood. Peasants and merchants degenerate terribly quickly. Just read my story, 'Three Years'. And then look how tough you are! The only thing that's wrong with you is that you are too thin—like a good horzoi. Take a tonic, and you'll live a hundred years. I'll write you a prescription to-day if you like. I'm a doctor, remember. Kondakov himself has been to me for treatment, and I cured him of piles. . . . But in your memoirs you mustn't write that I had 'a sympathetic talent', and was 'a man of crystal purity'."

"That was written about me," I said. "They said I had a sympathetic gift."

His laughter had a curiously strained ring, almost as if it hurt him. He always laughed like that when he was particularly pleased.

"Wait—what was it Korolenko said about you?"

"It wasn't Korolenko, it was Zlatovratski. He wrote about one of my first short stories that 'it would have done credit even to a bigger writer'."

He doubled up in a long fit of laughter, then put on his pince-nez and said, looking at me sharply and gaily:

"Still, it's not as bad as the things that have been said about me. I got a thrashing from the critics every Saturday, as they do at the seminary. Serve me right, too. At the beginning I wrote like the last son of a bitch. I am a proletarian, you know. When I was little I sold tallow candles in our shop in Taganrog. Ugh, how devilishly cold it was there! And yet I took the greatest pleasure in wrapping up an icy candle in a scrap of paper. And our latrine was a waste plot of ground a mile away from the

house. Sometimes I'd run there in the middle of the night, and find some rogue sleeping there. We'd scare each other terribly. But here is my advice to you," he suddenly added. "Stop being a dilettante, try to become a craftsman, at least to some extent. It's very bad to write as I did—for a piece of bread—but a certain degree of craftsmanship is really indispensable. You cannot always sit and wait for inspiration "

Then, after a pause:

"As to Korolenko, he ought to go and be unfaithful to his wife. That would make him write better. Do you remember telling me how he wept with enthusiasm over a poem in the *Russian World* by somebody, Verbov or Vetkov or something, which described the 'wolves of reaction' surrounding the popular poet in a field, in a terrible snowstorm, and how the poet struck a melodious chord on his lyre and the wolves scampered away in terror. Was that true?"

"My word of honour."

"By the way, do you know that in Perm all the cab-drivers look like Dobrolubov?"

"You don't like Dobrolubov?"

"Yes, I do. At least, he was a decent man. Not like Skabichevski who wrote that I would die in the gutter from too much drinking, because I hadn't 'the divine spark' in me."

"Do you know," I said, "that Skabichevski told me once that he had never seen how rye grows, and had never spoken to a peasant?"

"There you are! And yet all his life he wrote about the 'common people' and about books on peasant life. Yes,

it's funny to remember all the things that have been said about me. My blood was cold, they said—do you remember, I've got a short story called 'Cold Blood'? And I don't care a hang what I'm depicting—a dog or a drowned man, a train or first love. . . . 'The Gloomy People' helped me a bit, though: it was found that the story had some value because it allegedly dealt with the reaction of the eighties. Likewise, 'The Fit'—because in it an 'honest' student goes mad thinking about prostitution. And yet I detest Russian students—they're all gadabouts. . . ."



One day when he began again to tease me about the things I would write about him in my memoirs, I said:

"I'll start by saying how and why we met. It was in 1895, in December. I did not know you had arrived in Moscow. That evening I was sitting at the Grand Moscow Hotel, drinking red wine and listening to the mechanical piano and to the poet who was with me, who kept declaiming his own poetry and growing more and more enthusiastic about himself. We stayed there till about three o'clock in the morning, and by the time we got up to go the poet was so worked up that he could not stop himself reciting. So, still reciting, he walked down the stairs, entered the cloakroom and began fumbling for his coat. The porter said sweetly: 'Allow me, sir, I'll find it for you.' The poet turned on him like a wild beast: 'Quiet! Don't interrupt.'—'But . . . please excuse me, sir, but this isn't your coat.'—'What's that, you wretch? Are you saying that I'm taking somebody else's coat?'—

'That's right, sir, it *is* somebody else's.'—'Be quiet, you scoundrel, it's mine!'—'No, sir, I assure you, it isn't.'—'Then tell me instantly—whose is it?'—'It belongs to Anton Pavlovich Chekhov.'—'What? You're lying! I'll kill you on the spot for such a lie.'—'Certainly, sir, if that is your wish. But this coat belongs to Anton Pavlovich all the same.'—'But then—he's here?'—'He always stays here.' We were on the point of rushing upstairs to make your acquaintance—at three in the morning!—but we controlled ourselves in time and called on you the next day. The first time we missed you. We only saw your room, which the maid was tidying up, and a manuscript on the table. It was the beginning of the 'Women's Kingdom'."

He roared with laughter.

"I can guess who the poet was," he said. "Nice chap. But how did you know what manuscript was lying on the table? Had a peep, eh?"

"Forgive us. We couldn't resist it."

"Pity you didn't come that night. It's nice to suddenly go off somewhere in the middle of the night. I like restaurants."



He laughed more heartily than ever when I told him that our village deacon, invited to our house to celebrate my father's saint's day, finished to the last grain about two pounds of caviar. He started his short story, "In the Ravine", with that incident.





He used to say that a man who does not work, who does not constantly live in an atmosphere of art, be he Solomon the Wise himself, will still feel empty and devoid of talent.

Sometimes he took his notebook out of the desk and, raising his face, his pince-nez sparkling, waved it about in the air:

"Exactly one hundred plots. Yes, my dear sir! You couldn't vie with that! I'm a real worker. Can I sell you a couple?"



Occasionally he allowed himself an evening walk. One night we were coming back late. He walked silently, with his eyes half closed, and looked ready to drop—in the past few days he had stained many handkerchiefs with blood. We passed under a balcony where the light was on and a woman's silhouette showed through the canvas curtain. Suddenly he opened his eyes and said in a loud, resonant voice:

"Have you heard? What a terrible thing! Bunin was murdered in Autka, in the room of a Tatar woman."

I stopped in amazement, and he whispered hurriedly with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes:

"Be quiet! To-morrow the whole town will be talking about the murder of Bunin."



A writer once complained to him: "When I remember how bad, how feeble my first writings were, I could cry with shame."

"Oh, how can you say that!" he exclaimed, "It's wonderful to begin badly. Believe me, if with a beginner everything comes out pat, it means he's finished, you can give him up."

And he began to argue passionately that only *able* people—i.e. those who are unoriginal, who are essentially devoid of talent—can mature easily and quickly, because ability equals a capacity for adapting oneself, ability "has an easy life", whereas real talent lives in torment, forever seeking to express itself.



There were many Turks and Caucasians working on the Black Sea coast. Knowing the mixture of hostility and contempt which Russians had for foreigners, he never missed an opportunity of saying enthusiastically what honest, hardworking chaps those people were.



He ate little, slept little and was exceptionally tidy. His rooms were kept remarkably clean, his bedroom was like a young girl's. No matter how ill he felt, he never let himself go where his appearance was concerned.

His hands were large, dry and pleasant.

As it happens to many people who do a great deal of thinking, he often forgot things he had already said several times.



I remember his silences, his cough, his closed eyes, his thoughtful, calm and sorrowful, almost solemn face. But I do not remember "melancholy" or "warmth".

A clear, cool, winter day in the Crimea; thick sleepy clouds over the Yaila. The alarm clock in his mother's room is ticking regularly. He is sitting in his study, by the desk, and writing something unhurriedly and carefully. Then he gets up, puts on his coat and hat and low leather galoshes, and goes out somewhere where a mouse-trap has been set. He comes back holding a live mouse by the end of its tail, goes out on to the porch, slowly walks across the garden to the fence, beyond which, on a stony hillock, lies a Tatar graveyard. He carefully drops the mouse over the fence and walks back, examining the young trees on his way. A crane comes running after him, behind it—two small dogs. He sits down on a bench in the middle of the garden and starts playing gently with his stick with one of the dogs which has rolled on its back at his feet. He smiles: some fleas are crawling over the pink belly. . . . Then, leaning back on the bench, he looks into the distance, at Yaila, his face raised, thinking thoughts of his own. He remains there for an hour or more. . . .



Did he have at least one great love in his life? I do not think he had. "Love," he wrote in his notebook, "is either the shrinking remnant of something which once was enormous; or else it is a part of something which will grow in the future into something enormous. But in the

present it does not satisfy. It gives much less than one expects."



What did he think of death?

He often said, firmly and deliberately, that immortality, life after death in any form whatever, is sheer bunkum.

"It's a superstition, and any superstition is awful. One should think clearly and courageously. One day we must discuss it all thoroughly, you and I. I'll prove to you, like two and two make four, that immortality is nonsense."

But more than once he said the opposite, even more firmly:

"It's quite impossible that we should disappear without a trace. Of course we'll live after death! Immortality is a fact. Just wait, I'll prove it to you."



In the last years of his life he often dreamed aloud:

"Ah, to become a tramp, a wanderer! To go to holy places, or live in a monastery in the wood, by a lake, and sit on summer evenings on a little bench by the monastery gates. . . ."



His "Bishop" passed unnoticed—unlike the *Cherry Orchard*, with the enormous paper flowers which blossomed out in such extraordinary abundance behind the

windows of the theatre set. And, indeed, who can tell what would have become of his fame had it not been for the "Game of Vint", "The Peasants" and the Moscow Arts Theatre?

"A month later a new suffragan bishop was appointed, and no one thought any more of the Right Reverend Pyotr. Soon he was forgotten completely. Only the old woman, the dead man's mother, who is now living with her son-in-law the deacon in a remote little country town, when she goes out at sunset to bring her cow in and joins the other women on the way, tells them about her children and grandchildren, and about her boy who became a bishop. This she says timidly, afraid that they might not believe her; and indeed some of them do not."



His last letter, written abroad, reached me in the country in the middle of June 1904. He wrote that he was feeling fairly well, that he had ordered himself a new suit and that his only worry was Japan, "a wonderful country" which would obviously be beaten and crushed by Russia. On the 4th of July I rode on horseback to the village post office, collected my mail and newspapers and turned towards the village forge to have my horse reshod. It was a sultry, sleepy day, as they occur in the steppes, with a dimly glimmering sky and a hot wind. I sat down on the doorstep of the blacksmith's cottage, opened a newspaper—and suddenly an icy razor slashed my heart. . . .



His death was hastened by a cold. Before leaving Moscow he went to the public steam-baths, and after he had taken a bath and got dressed he went out into the street too soon: he met Sergueyenko in the hall, and ran away from him, from his obtrusive, endless talk.

It was the man who for a long time pestered Tolstoy (*How Tolstoy Lives and Works*) and whom Chekhov for his bony, lanky figure had nicknamed "A funeral cart standing upright".

## Chaliapin



IT WAS often said in Moscow that Chaliapin only made friends with writers to spite Sobinov—his rival in singing—and that what attracted him to the writers was not love of literature but a desire to add to his reputation as a great singer that of “a man with progressive ideas”. As to the kind of audience which always and everywhere goes mad over tenors—well, they were welcome to lose their heads over Sobinov. It seems to me, however, that Chaliapin’s feelings towards us could sometimes be disinterested. For example, I remember how anxious he was to meet Chekhov, and how often he spoke to me about it. At last I asked him:

“But what’s stopping you?”

“The fact that Chekhov never shows himself in public,” he replied. “One never gets a chance to be introduced to him.”

“Good gracious, you don’t need to wait for a chance! Just take a cab and go to him.”

“But I don’t want to appear impertinent. Besides, I know I’d be so shy that I’d look a complete fool.”

“Come, now, you don’t have to try and fool me.”

“As God is my witness, I’m not. I wish you could take me to him one day. . . .”

I wasted no time in doing so, and saw that he had been

quite right: when he entered Chekhov's room he blushed to the ears and mumbled something unintelligible. When we came out he was in ecstasies.

"You cannot imagine how charmed I am, how happy I am to have met him at last! What a man! Now all the others will seem like camels to me."

"Thank you," I said.

The street echoed with his uproarious laughter.



Chaliapin was generally considered very left-wing, and everybody roared with delight when he sang "The Marseillaise" at the end of "The Two Grenadiers", or "The Flea", in which one also detected a revolutionary spirit, a satirical ridiculing of kings.

*A king lived once upon a time,  
And with him lived a flea*

And yet, all of a sudden, Satan fell on his knees before the King! The rumour swept over Russia: Chaliapin had knelt before the Tsar. One well-known writer was so indignant that he sent Chaliapin his photograph back. And how many times since did Chaliapin try to justify his trespass!

"How could I help kneeling down?" he used to say. "It was the opera-choir's benefit night, and the Tsar being present, the choir decided to use the occasion for falling on their knees before him and asking for a rise in pay. They went and did it, and as I was singing among them



what else could I do? I did not expect that genuflection, and suddenly I saw the whole choir falling as though a scythe had mowed them down—all on their knees, their hands stretched out towards the royal box. What could I do? I couldn't very well remain standing, sticking out like a telegraph pole. It would have caused a public scandal."

The last time I saw him in Russia was in April 1917, when Lenin had already arrived in Petersburg and taken possession of Ksheshinskaya's house. I was also in Petersburg at that time, and, together with Chaliapin, I received an invitation from Gorki to attend a meeting at the Mikhailov Theatre where he was to deliver a speech about some kind of "Academy of Free Science" which he had just set up. I can neither understand nor remember for what reason Chaliapin and I were invited to that absurd gathering. Gorki made an extremely long and highfalutin speech, and then announced:

"Comrades, we have among us Chaliapin and Bunin. I invite you to welcome them."

The audience broke into furious applause, stamping their feet and calling us to come out. We escaped backstage, when suddenly someone came running after us, saying that the audience wanted Chaliapin to sing. So it looked as if Chaliapin would have to fall on his knees once again. But he said firmly:

"I'm not a fireman to climb on the roof at the first command. Go and explain that to the audience."

The messenger disappeared, and Chaliapin turned to me, spreading out his arms in bewilderment:

"You see, brother, what a business it is: I can't sing and I can't not sing. Eventually the devils will remember

it and hang me on a lamp-post. But all the same, I'm not going to sing."

In Paris, at the end of 1937, I heard him for the last time, at a concert where he sang alone and with the Afonski choir alternately. He was already ill at the time and was extraordinarily nervous. Of course he used to be nervous at every performance—that is the usual thing. I have seen Ermolova tremble all over and cross herself before she went on the stage. I saw Lenski and even Rossi himself at the end of a performance: they used to collapse half dead in their dressing-rooms. It might have been the same with Chaliapin sometimes, only the audience never saw it. But at this, his last concert, they saw it. What saved him was his talent for gestures and intonations. When the concert was over I got a note from him asking me to come and see him back-stage. I found him there pale and sweating, holding a cigarette with trembling fingers. He asked immediately:

"Well, how did I sing?"

"Beautifully, of course," I replied, and added jokingly: "You sang so well that I kept humming with you, to the indignation of the people around me."

"Thank you, my dear chap. Do go on humming, by all means," he said with a vague smile, and added: "I'm not feeling at all well, you know; I'll be leaving for the Austrian mountains shortly. There's nothing like the mountains, brother. And where will you go for the summer?"

Again I said jokingly:

"Anywhere except the mountains. As it is, I'm in the mountains all the time: either Montmartre or Montparnasse."

## CHALIAPIN

Again he smiled vaguely.

Why did he give that last concert? Probably because he felt that he had nearly spent himself and wanted to say good-bye to the stage. I do not think he did it for money, though he was fond of money. "Only little birds sing for nothing," he used to say



I saw him for the last time six weeks or so before his death, when M. A. Aldinov and I went to visit him. He was already critically ill, but there was a great deal of strength still left in him, one could still see the brilliant man and the brilliant actor. We found him sitting in the corner of the dining room, by a lamp with a yellow lampshade, wearing a black silk dressing-gown and red slippers; a shock of hair, as always, stood high above his forehead. He was enormous and magnificent as an old lion. I had never seen him look so distinguished before. What blood did he have in him? The special north-Russian blood that flowed in the veins of Lomonosov and the brothers Vashnetzov, and also, undoubtedly, some other—Varangian, Scandinavian—blood. In his youth he had a very low class appearance, but with years he changed a great deal.



When he first heard him sing, Tolstoy said:  
"No! He sings too loud."

One still meets plenty of clever people who are sincerely convinced that Tolstoy understood nothing about

art. We can disregard them. Yet how are we to account for such an estimation of Chaliapin? Is it conceivable that Tolstoy should have remained insensible to all the merits of Chaliapin's singing? Of course not. He simply kept silent about them and mentioned only what seemed to him a defect, pointing out something which indeed Chaliapin always had and especially at that time, when he was only about twenty-five years old: a certain superabundance, an overflowing lavishness. There was too much in him of the reckless, superhumanly powerful *bogaty*r of the Russian folklore. This was partly innate and partly acquired on the stage. Soon his entire life became a stage, and he lived continuously stimulated by public admiration, everywhere, the world over, wherever he appeared, be it the opera stage or a concert platform, a fashionable beach or an expensive restaurant. Moderation is difficult for one who has tasted fame.

"Fame is like sea-water," Chekhov used to say jokingly. "The more you drink the thirstier you are."

Chaliapin drank that water endlessly, and remained endlessly thirsty. Can we condemn him for the urge to show his strength and daring, his "Russianness", or for his fondness to stress "from what low filth he rose to princedom"?

One day he produced a photograph of his father:

"See what a parent I had? He thrashed me mercilessly."

Yet the picture showed a highly sedate, respectable individual of about fifty, wearing a starched shirt with a turn-down collar and black tie, and a racoon fur coat, and I felt doubtful: did he really thrash his son? How is it that these so called "native geniuses" should have been

mercilessly thrashed, all of them, when they were young? "Gorki, Chaliapin have risen from the lowest depth of the Russian sea." But was it really "the lowest depth"? A father who served on the district council and wore a racoon coat and a starched shirt was not so low a depth as all that. I think that in Chaliapin's memoirs the whole story of his childhood, adolescence and youth has been somewhat embellished; so were, no doubt, his friends and comrades of those days, such as the blacksmith, for example, who spoke such suspiciously "beautiful" words about singing:

"Sing, Fedya, sing and your heart will rejoice. A song's like a bird: let it free and it'll fly."

Nevertheless, his life was really like a fairy-tale: it is a long way from friendship with a blacksmith to friendly dinners with grand-dukes and princes. Also, his life was happy beyond all measure in every respect. Truly, God had bestowed upon him "within the limits of the earth all that was earthly". Among other gifts, He granted him enormous physical health, which was shaken only after forty years of wandering all over the world and through every variety of earthly temptation.

Once in the London Hotel in Odessa I stayed in the room adjoining that of Battistini, who was then touring Russia. Everybody was amazed by the freshness of his voice and by his youthfulness in general, though he was seventy-four years old at the time. What was the secret of that youthfulness? Partly the way he looked after himself: after every performance he went straight home, drank some hot milk with seltzer water and went to bed. As for Chaliapin, I knew him for many years, and this is what

I remember clearly: most of our meetings took place in restaurants. I cannot recall exactly when and where we became acquainted, but I remember drinking *Bruderschaft* with him one night at the Big Moscow Tavern in the huge building opposite the Iver Chapel. There was also an hotel in the building, in which I stayed for long periods when I came to Moscow. The word "tavern" had long since become unsuitable for the expensive spacious restaurant which the tavern had become by that time, and least of all in the years I lived over it, in the hotel: it had just been enlarged and several new rooms had been added, luxuriously furnished and decorated, and destined for particularly wealthy clients and for the nightly carousals of the Big Moscow merchants of the Europeanized kind. That night, I remember, the most notable of the revellers was the Moscow Frenchman Sioux, who came with his friends, including myself. The champagne at our table flowed like water, as one says, and Sioux kept sending out hundred-rouble tips to the Neapolitan musicians, who, dressed in their attractive jackets, were playing and singing on a stage brilliantly lit by chandeliers. All of a sudden Chaliapin's enormous yellow-haired figure appeared at the door. For a moment he fixed the orchestra with what is termed "an eagle eye", then made a sudden sweeping gesture with his hand and joined in the singing. Needless to say, that unexpected "royal favour" sent the whole company delirious with joy.

We drank all night, and in the morning, when we left the restaurant, we stopped in the staircase to kiss each other good-bye. Suddenly Chaliapin turned to me and said in a tenor voice:

"I think, Vanusha, that you're very tight indeed, and consequently I've decided to carry you to your room on my own back."

"I must point out," said I, "that I live on the fifth floor, and that I'm not as small as all that, either."

"No matter, my dear, I'll manage somehow."

And he did, however hard I struggled. And when he had carried me upstairs he played his *bogatyr* role to the end: he ordered a hundred-rouble bottle of a hundred-year-old Burgundy (which turned out to have a taste like raspberry water).



One should not exaggerate things, but neither should one minimize them: he certainly did spend himself without counting—talking ceaselessly without letting anybody else slip in a word, telling story after story, mimicking every scene—all this thick with puns and doggerel (more often than not of the meatiest sort)—chain-smoking, and never for a moment abandoning his role of a legendary *bogatyr*.

One cold winter night in Moscow we were tearing along in a cab, going from the Prague to the Strelnya. It was something like thirty degrees below freezing point, the horse was going at full pelt, and he sat upright, his fur coat thrown open, speaking in a loud voice, laughing uproariously and smoking so that sparks were flying in the wind. At last I could not bear it any longer and shouted:

"What are you trying to do? Stop talking, cover yourself properly and throw away that cigarette."

"You're a clever chap, Vanya," he replied in a treacly voice, "but this time you're worrying about nothing. I'm made of special Russian stuff which can withstand anything."

"I'm sick and tired of all that old-mother-Russia talk," I said.

"You see, you're scolding me again. And I'm afraid of scolding: scolding can drive a man into an early grave. Why do you keep calling me *bogatyr*, 'the legendary Russian hero' and all that? What have I done to deserve it?"

"I'll tell you what you've done. You dress up in a peasant coat, in loose silk shirts with a crimson sash; you cultivate a pseudo-popular style, together with Gorki, Andreev and Skitaletz; you keep having your pictures taken with them, your arms thrown round each other's shoulders, in reckless and soulful poses. It's about time you stopped all that. Remember who you are and who they are."

"But in what way am I so different?"

"In such a way that Gorki and Andreev are very able men, but all their writings are just 'literature', and often of the cheapest kind; they haven't got a scrap of charm, which only genuine talent can possess."

"What about me? Have I got charm?"

"Don't be so modest. You know perfectly well what I mean. Your voice, at any rate, isn't 'literature'."

"A drunken man, Vanya, is always inclined to pay compliments."

"There is some truth in that," I said, laughing. "Nevertheless, you must be quiet and button yourself up."

"As you wish."



## CHALIAPIN

But as soon as he had done up his coat, he suddenly roared out, "Karl has some enemies", in such a thundering voice that the horse shot forward.



There was in those days in Moscow a literary circle calling itself "Wednesday", whose members gathered once a week at the house of the writer Telezhov, a rich and hospitable man. We read our writings to each other, exchanged criticisms and had supper. Chaliapin was a frequent guest and listened to our reading, although he detested listening; sometimes he sat down to the piano and, accompanying himself, sang Russian folk-songs or French music-hall songs, or "The Flea", or "The Marseillaise", or the "Volga Boatmen", and we held our breath.

One evening he announced as soon as he came in:  
"Brothers, I feel like singing."

He telephoned Serguei Rachmaninov and told him the same thing:

"I'm longing to sing. Take a cab and come at once. We'll sing all night."

When Rachmaninov arrived he did not even give him time for a cup of tea.

He was then at the height of his fame and brilliance, and it can easily be imagined what that evening was like: Chaliapin and Rachmaninov together. Chaliapin's singing was such that he said himself:

"You don't get this at the opera, do you? You shouldn't go there to hear me, but listen to me here with Serguei."

## MEMORIES AND PORTRAITS

I heard him sing like that once more, in Capri, at the Hotel Quisisana, where my wife and I spent three consecutive winters. We gave a dinner in his honour and invited Gorki and a few other members of the Russian colony. After dinner he suddenly volunteered to sing—and another wonderful evening followed. All the hotel guests and many of the local people thronged into the dining-room and all the drawing-rooms of the hotel and listened breathlessly, their eyes blazing with excitement.

When, later on, I once lunched in his house in Paris, he recalled that night:

“Do you remember how I sang at your place in Capri?”

Then he went to the gramophone and started putting on some records he had made in the past. He listened to himself with tears in his eyes, muttering:

“I wasn’t bad. Not everybody’s got a voice like that. . . .”

## Gorki



THIS STRANGE friendship between Gorki and me—strange because for nearly two decades we were regarded as great friends though in reality we were not—began in 1899. It ended in 1917. Then the man who for twenty years gave me no ground for any personal hostility suddenly became an enemy who for a long while aroused horror and indignation in me. In the course of time those feelings burnt themselves out and now I feel nothing, as though he had ceased to exist for me.

The following was unexpected:

"L'écrivain Maxime Gorki est décédé . . . Alexis Péchkoff, connu en littérature sous le nom de Gorki, était né en 1868 à Nijni-Novgorod d'une famille de cosaques. . . ."

That was the first I ever heard about his Cossack origin. It is one more legend. First a barefooted tramp, then a Cossack. . . . Is it not surprising that to this day there is much in Gorki's past that is not clear? Who knows his exact biography? It is affirmed persistently, for instance: "He was a tramp and rose from the depths of the people." But in the Brockhaus dictionary we read differently: "Gorki-Peshkov, Alexey Maximovich. Born in 1868 in a completely bourgeois milieu: his father was a

manager of a large shipping company, his mother—a daughter of a rich paint merchant." All the rest is based exclusively on Gorki's autobiography: he was a galley-boy on a ship on the Volga, then a gardener, sold apples, worked as a clerk at the office of a Nijni-Novgorod barrister called Lanin; after he left him, he "wandered all over the south of Russia".

His first essay, "Makar Chudra", was published in 1892 in the newspaper *Caucasus*. Three years after that appeared the famous "Chelkash". It was at that period that I heard of him for the first time. I lived in Poltava, in the Ukraine, when a rumour spread through the town: "A young writer by the name of Gorki has come to live near Kobelyaki. A wonderfully picturesque figure: a great big hefty fellow with the widest cloak you can imagine, a hat with a brim as wide as this, and a huge knotted stick in his hand. . . ."

We met in the spring of 1899. I was in Yalta, in the Crimea, and one day as I was walking along the quay I suddenly saw Chekhov coming towards me, and beside him somebody who was talking loudly in a deep bass voice and constantly throwing up his arms from under a wide cloak. I greeted Chekhov and he said: "Let me introduce you: Bunin, Gorki." I noticed that the Poltava description was in the main correct: the cloak was there all right, and a hat *this* wide, and a heavy stick. Under the cloak he wore a peasant blouse of bright yellow silk belted with a thick long cream-coloured cord and embroidered with bright silks at the collar and the hem. But he was not particularly big and hefty—he was just a tall, round-backed, ginger-haired factory worker with small greenish eyes, a quick

## GORKI

and shifty look, wide nostrils in a saddle-shaped nose, freckles, and a long moustache like a walrus's, which he kept smoothing down: he would cough, spit on his fingers a little and then stroke the moustache. . . .

That very first day, if I remember rightly, a kind of friendship arose between us, on his part even of a somewhat sentimental nature, mixed with a certain timid admiration:

"You are the last writer of noble origin, of the culture which gave the world Pushkin and Tolstoy. . . ."

As soon as Chekhov had called a cab and gone home to Autka, Gorki suggested that I should go with him to the room which he was renting in Vinogradskaya Street. There, wrinkling up his nose and with an embarrassed, happy, comically stupid smile, he produced a photograph of his wife holding a fat baby with lively eyes; then he showed me a piece of pale-blue silk and said with the same grimaces:

"You see, I bought this for a blouse . . . for that same woman, I mean . . . it's a present I'm taking her. . . ."

He was now very different from the man who stood on the quay with Chekhov: he was nice, jokingly affected modest to the point of self-effacement; he had shed his deep bass voice and his deliberate rudeness and spoke almost apologetically, in a soulful Volga sing-song talk with rounded o's. He acted both parts with the same pleasure and was untiring in both. Later on I found out that he could carry on a monologue from morning till night with the same smoothness, entering either role completely; at touching moments, when he tried to be particularly convincing, he could easily squeeze a few

## MEMORIES AND PORTRAITS

tears out of his greenish eyes. Already that first day he revealed some other traits which I was to notice in him constantly in the years to come. The first was that he was quite different in public from what he was *en tête-à-tête* with me. With other people he roared in his deep bass, went pale from vanity and pride and from the raptures of the "public" over him; he kept talking about something shocking or tremendously important or sublime, was fond of preaching to his admirers, and spoke to them now sternly and casually, now dryly and didacticly; but when he was alone with me, or among a few close friends, he became pleasant, naively happy, shy and modest to a fault. The second trait I noticed was his adoration of culture and literature, of which he talked incessantly. Things that I was to hear a hundred times later on I already heard that day in Yalta.

"You understand—what makes you a real writer is, first and foremost, that you have culture in your blood. You have inherited the high artistic standards of Russian literature. We, writers for the new reader, must study that culture untiringly, we must value it with all our hearts—only then may some good yet come out of us."

Undoubtedly, in all this, too, there was some acting, there was "the pride that calls itself humility". But up to a point he must have been sincere: for how else would it have been possible for him to repeat the same things over and over again, so many years on end, often with tears in his eyes?

He was long and bony, with a narrow-chested stoop, with fairly wide shoulders which he held rather high. He walked lightly, toes first, with a certain slinking

grace typical, if I may say so, of thieves: I have often seen that kind of walk in the port of Odessa.

He had large, gentle hands, like a priest. When he shook hands with you, he kept your hand for a long time in his, squeezing it pleasantly, and gave you a big smacking kiss with his soft lips. He had protruding cheekbones, like a Tatar's. His ginger hair, which he wore brushed back and rather long, grew low over a smallish forehead, wrinkled like a monkey's; the skin of the forehead and the eyebrows kept going up in folds towards the hair. In the expression of his face (at that time of the rather delicate colour which usually goes with red hair, there sometimes flashed something clownish, vicious and comical, which later on was so pronounced and vivid in his little son Maxim, whom I used to put on my back, holding him by the feet, and gallop with him through the room until he squealed with delight).

By the time we met his fame was already spreading over Russia. In later years it never ceased growing. The Russian intelligentsia completely lost their heads over him, and the reason for it was easy to understand. Not only was it already the time of a great upsurge of Russian revolutionism, with whose spirit Gorki fully complied, but it was also the time of a struggle between the populists and the newly arrived Marxists—and Gorki was annihilating the moujik and singing hymns to the "Chelkashes" whom the Marxists in their revolutionary hopes and plans were so heavily backing. Consequently, every new book of Gorki's instantaneously became an event of national importance. Gorki himself kept changing, in his mode of life as well as in his manner with people. He was now

renting a whole house in Nizhni-Novgorod, had a large flat in Petersburg, and often appeared in Moscow and in the Crimea. He ran the journal *The New Life* and had founded the "Znanie" publishing firm. He had already started writing for the Arts Theatre, and wrote dedications to the actress Knipper in the following style:

"I should have liked to bind this book for you, Olga Leonardovna, with the skin of my heart."

He had already launched first Andreev, then Skitaletz on their literary careers, and had become very intimate with them. Occasionally he did the same with other writers, but in most cases the intimacy was brief: having charmed the lucky man he would suddenly withdraw his favours. It was painful to see him with people. Wherever he appeared, he was at once surrounded by such a throng, all gazing at him with admiration, that it was impossible to elbow one's way through. For his part, he would become more awkward than ever; he did not look at anybody but remained sitting with two or three celebrities; he frowned fiercely, soldier-fashion, he coughed, he smoked one cigarette after another and drank red wine without a stop, at times swallowing down a whole glassful in one gulp. Lively now and again he would pronounce in a solemn, loud voice, for general consumption, some sententious phrase or political prophecy, and then again, pretending that he did not notice anybody around him, frowning, drumming with his long fingers on the table, raising his eyebrows and the folds on his forehead with feigned indifference, he would speak only with his friends, and even then in a rather abrupt, offhand way; and they, reflecting on their faces the ever-changing expressions



they caught on his and revelling in their closeness to him, with assumed nonchalance kept slipping in his Christian name at every opportunity:

"How true, Alexey. . . . No, you're wrong there Alexey. . . . But don't you see, Alexey. . . ."

All trace of youth had disappeared in him by then. It happened to him very quickly: his complexion had become coarser and darker, his moustache thicker and bigger—some people called him "the corporal"; many wrinkles had appeared on his face, and his eyes had something arrogant and unkind in them. When we met otherwise than in public he was almost the same as before, only more serious and more confident. But in front of other people (with whose admiration he could not live) he was often rude.

On one occasion in Yalta, at a large party, I saw the actress Ermolova—Ermolova in person, and already old—going up to him to present him with a beautiful cigarette-case made of whalebone. She was so shy, so confused, and blushed so deeply that there were tears in her eyes:

"Here, Maxim Alexeyevich . . . I mean Alexey Maximovich. . . . This is for you. . . . I . . ."

He stood by a table, squashing the end of his cigarette in an ashtray, and did not so much as raise his eyes.

"I wanted to express, Alexey Maximovich, our . . ."

Still looking down at the table, he sneered grimly and, jerking back his head, as was his habit, and tossing his hair from his forehead, muttered in a deep bass, as though under his breath, a verse from the Book of Job:

"How long wilt thou not depart from me, nor let me alone till I swallow down my spittle?"

But what if he had been left alone?

He now walked about dressed in a dark blouse with a Caucasian leather belt worked with silver, and a special kind of boots with short tops in which he tucked in his black trousers. Everybody knows how, in imitation of his "popular" style, Andreev, Skitaletz and other "Maximovites" (including even Chaliapin) also donned peasant blouses, high boots and tight-waisted peasant coats. It was insufferable. One evening, in the thick crowd that filled the foyer of the Arts Theatre during an interval, I saw those "Maximovites" moving towards me in a bunch, and I said in a loud voice, with the words and tone of Koko in *The Fruit of Enlightenment* when he saw a group of peasants in his hall:

"Eh, eh, eh . . . are you . . . hunters?"

We met in Petersburg, in Moscow, in Nizhni-Novgorod, in the Crimea. We did some business together, too: at first I contributed to his journal, *The New Life*, then had my first books published by his firm, "Znanie", and took part in the "Znanie" symposia. His own books were sold in hundreds of thousands. Other books, chiefly owing to the trademark "Znanie", also went quite well. "Znanie" considerably raised the writers' fees. The contributors to the symposia were paid three to four hundred roubles, some as much as five hundred, per sheet, and Gorki himself—a thousand roubles. He had always been fond of big money. He started his collectioneering at the time; he collected old coins, medals, gems, precious stones; restraining a contented smile, he handled them deftly and gently, examined them, showed them to others. He drank wine in the same manner: with taste and relish

(at home he drank only French wine, even though there was plenty of excellent Russian wine to be had).

I always marvelled how there was enough of him for everything: day in day out in public—either at a public meeting or at a gathering of some description or other at his own house—speaking for hours on end, drinking incessantly, smoking a hundred cigarettes a day, sleeping five or six hours at the most, and writing novel after novel, play after play in his firm rounded handwriting. There is a widely spread belief that he was quite illiterate and that his manuscripts were always revised by somebody else. But in fact he wrote quite correctly (and with extraordinary competence, which he had even when he had just begun to write). And the amount he read, with the insatiable greed of the eternal semi-intellectual, was quite incredible.

A great deal has been said about his exceptional knowledge of Russia. He must have acquired it in the short spell of time when, after he left Lanin he “wandered in the south of Russia”. For when I met him he was no longer wandering anywhere; nor did he wander since. He lived in the Crimea, in Moscow, in Nizhni-Novgorod and in Petersburg. In 1905, after the December rising in Moscow, he emigrated abroad via Finland; he visited America, then spent seven years in Capri, where he stayed till 1914. Then, on his return to Russia, he firmly entrenched himself in Petersburg. The rest is well known.

My wife and I went to Capri five years in succession, and spent three whole winters there. At that time I met Gorki every day, we spent nearly every evening together and became very close friends. It was the time when I found him most pleasant.

## MEMORIES AND PORTRAITS

At the beginning of April 1917 we parted on friendly terms. On the day I was leaving Petersburg he organized a huge meeting in the Mikhailov Theatre, at which he came out with a "cultural" appeal for some kind of "Academy of Free Science". He dragged me and Chaliapin there. As he mounted on the platform he said: "Comrades, So-and-so and So-and-so are here among us. . . ." The audience gave us a stormy welcome, but its composition was such that I did not feel particularly flattered. Then Gorki, Chaliapin, Alexander Benois and myself went to the Restaurant Medved. There was a pail of fresh caviar on the table, and a lot of champagne. . . . When I got up to leave he followed me into the passage, embraced me many times and warmly kissed me good-bye—for ever, as it turned out to be.

## His Imperial Highness



ONE DAY when I was going through my papers I came across a parcel marked "Pyotr Alexandrov".

The parcel contained a bundle of letters addressed to me, the manuscript of a sketch entitled "Solitude", a collection of short stories (*The Dream*, by Pyotr Alexandrov, Paris, 1921), and finally a cutting out of the newspaper *Pravda* an article written after his death by Mark Aldanov. He spent the last years of his life in exile and died of consumption seven years ago, in his fifty-sixth year.

He was a remarkable man.

Aldanov called him "a man of amazing nobility and kindness of heart" He was sparing in his epithets. Pyotr Alexandrov had many other qualities which would have been amazing even had he been an ordinary mortal—whilst he had royal blood. He who had chosen for his literary work so modest a pen-name—Pyotr Alexandrov—bore in real life a name infinitely more impressive: Prince Pyotr Alexandrovich of Oldenburg. He belonged to a family which is considered to be one of the oldest in Europe: he was the last of the Russian branch of the Princes of Oldenburg, which merged with the family of the Romanovs, a great-grandson of the Emperor Paul I, married to a daughter of Alexander III, Olga Alexandrovna.

He astounded me the very first time we met. It was ten years ago, in Paris. I called at the "Zemgor".<sup>1</sup> The reception room was crowded, and by the door, standing alone behind everybody else, I saw an elderly man, very long, tall and strikingly thin, looking like a soldier in mufti. I passed him quickly, and yet he caught my attention at once. He was waiting patiently and modestly, but at the same time he stood with such freedom and ease, and so upright, that I said to myself: "He must have been a general. . . ." Again I glanced at him casually, and experienced for an instant that stab of pity one often feels at the sight of elderly, poor people who in the past had known wealth, power and eminence. He was very clean-shaven, like a soldier; his cheap, simple clothes were clean and neat. He was wearing a light mackintosh of non-descript colour, a paper collar and heavy shoes of the British Army type. I was struck by his height and his thinness: it was a particular kind of thinness, ancient, or like that of a mediaeval knight; there was something almost of a museum piece about it. His skull was small, quite bare, and aristocratic to the point of showing definite signs of degeneracy; the thin, dry skin on his small, bony face had a reddish tinge, as though it had been slightly scorched; his short little moustache also had that peculiar reddish-yellow colour characteristic of the old European aristocracy; his faded eyes under the triangular thinning eyebrows were modest, quiet and very earnest.

What happened next amazed me even more: an

<sup>1</sup> War-time relief organization which was evacuated abroad after the Revolution.

'acquaintance of mine came up to me and, smiling for some reason, said:

"His Highness asks your permission to introduce himself to you."

I thought he was joking. Who has heard of a Highness asking permission to introduce himself?

"What Highness?"

"The Prince of Oldenburg. Didn't you see him? There he is, by the door."

"But then what do you mean by 'asks my permission to introduce himself'?"

"He said it quite seriously. He is altogether a most unusual man."

After that I found out that he wrote short stories about Russian peasant life, in the manner of Tolstoy's popular tales. He came to see me and brought me the little book which was actually the object of his visit to the "Zemgor", for he was publishing it, at his own expense, at the "Zemgor" printing press. It consisted of three short stories, under the common title *The Dream*. Speaking of these short stories, Aldinov said: "Mediaeval chroniclers speak with horror of the bloody deeds of the Princes of Oldenburg. One of the Oldenburgs, Aegilmar, was particularly notorious for his cruelty. And here was a descendant of that Aegilmar, a great-grandson of the Emperor Paul, writing stories about the life of workers and peasants, and shortly before his death expressing the desire to join the Populist-Socialist Party! Yes, Russia certainly had all kinds of grand-dukes! Some, in 1917, turned out to be ardent republicans, and shook the late Rodzianko by wearing a red ribbon in their buttonholes. . . . The

Prince of Oldenburg did not wear such a ribbon. A close friendship, strengthened in childhood, on the 1st of March 1881, bound him to Nicholas II; no one could have had a more disinterested love for the late Emperor; but he had always considered his policy insane. He had even tried to 'influence' the Tsar and, mistrusting his own powers of conviction, had attempted to persuade him to meet Tolstoy. This fact alone gives one an idea of the mind and inner personality of the Prince of Oldenburg. There was nothing in him of the 'red Prince', of the Philippe Égalité inevitable in every dynasty. He never chased, and was in fact quite incapable of chasing, popularity—which would have been so easy to acquire in his position."

Of course, his writings were interesting only in so far as they gave an insight into the author's personality. He wrote about "the golden hearts" of the common people, who awakened from revolutionary intoxication to give themselves fervently to Christ, to His gospel of brotherly love, "the only salvation of the suffering world". He wrote passionately, lyrically, but so incompetently and naively that one felt embarrassed for him. However, he was aware of it himself, and when we became friends he often said to me with all his moving, immeasurable modesty:

"Forgive me, for God's sake, for pestering you all the time with these writings of mine. I know it's impertinence on my part, I know that I write like a child. But that is now my whole life. I write little, very seldom, mostly I just dream about it, only preparing myself to write. But I do dream about it day and night. I keep hoping, in spite of everything, that one day I shall write something worth while. . . ."



## HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS

His "Solitude", as well, is a surprising thing, coming from a man of royal blood. It contains, for example, the following lines:

"The end of September. A fine day. Around me, strips of emerald-coloured winter fields, of yellow stubble, of black earth. Threads of silvery cobweb float about gently; the woods are dark and not yet bare of leaves; through the glades one sees the white forms of the churches. I am on horseback. Two borzois—a white dog and a ginger bitch—are following the scent and running almost under the horse's hooves. The horse, swaying slightly, steps softly on the smooth green path. I gradually sink into a kind of semi-slumber. The reins fall out of my hands and hang down the horse's neck; I do not pick them up, afraid to move, so as not to break the blissful torpor which has got hold of me.

"A hare darts from under the horse's legs, the horse starts and I instinctively seize the reins. 'After him! Get him!' I shout at the top of my voice, galloping after the dogs. The white dog catches it up and they roll over in the field. . . .

"I drive through a lane. The dogs, with their tongues hanging out and panting heavily, walk behind the horse. The excitement of the baiting gradually dies down. I remember the sweet stupor that had seized me before, and I try to bring myself back into the same state, but all in vain. . . . Why do I not hear Her clear laughter any more? Why do I not see Her large, kind eyes, her soft smile? Can it be that our separation and my solitude are here for ever?

"I enter the village. I hear the cheerful hum of the

"threshing machines, the thud of the flails thumping on the ground. . . . I stop in front of a sooty forge on the common near the church. 'Semyon! Hey, Semyon!' I call out several times, getting off my horse. A short, stocky peasant comes out of a shed, walks up to the horse, and, looking up at me, says 'good day' and smiles affectionately.

" 'Good day, Semyon. Won't you come round to-night, for a chat' I say timidly, almost imploringly, very much afraid he might refuse. 'Why not? I'll look in, thanks,' he says simply, pulling at the small, skinny hare.

"My estate is not far from the village. The white house with its columns and penthouse stands there sadly, with all its windows boarded up, the stables are on the right; on the left is the lodge in which I am living. An old workman comes out to meet me. I get off the horse, he takes the bridle and leads it to the stable. I go into my rooms. I drink several glasses of vodka, eat quickly, anyhow, sit down in the armchair and try to read, but I am incapable of reading a single page. . . . I go up to the window, look across the yard at the boarded-up house, go back to the table, fill another glass of vodka, drink it down in one gulp. . . ."

Knowing that there was not a single word of untruth in those lines, I could not help thinking as I read them: what a strange man! As to the truthfulness of it all, he told me about that himself. After he had written "Solitude", he was particularly anxious to have it published and asked for my help, explaining with his usual childish simple-heartedness and shyness.

"Quite frankly, it would make me very happy. That essay is very dear to me because—forgive my indiscretion

—it is completely truthful. I experienced it all, it all hurt at the time . . . I mean, when I and Olya—Olga Alexandrovna—separated. . . .”

As I re-read these lines, I ask myself again the question which comes to my mind every time I think of him: what kind of man was he at bottom—that prince who timidly implored a blacksmith to spend an evening with him; the man who with the simplicity of a true saint, even in the presence of people quite unknown to him, referred to Nicholas II as Kolya? (On one occasion, in the house of a friend of ours, most of whose guests were old revolutionaries, he, after listening to their animated discussions, exclaimed with perfect sincerity, “Oh, what nice, charming people you all are! And what a pity that Kolya never spent an evening like this! Everything, everything would have been different if you and he had come to know each other!”) But I never found the real answer to the question: what kind of a man was he? I do not know it to this day. Some people simply called him abnormal. That may have been, but so was Prince Myshkin in the *Idiot*, so were the saints. . . .

His letters to me were very characteristic. Here are some passages from them:

“. . . I’ve settled down in the countryside near Bayonne, on my own little farm. I’ve got a cow and some hens and rabbits. I dig in the garden. . . . On Saturdays I go to see my parents who live nearby, in St. Jean-de-Luz. . . . I have not written anything for a long time; I cannot even manage to finish the short story I began last summer; when I do finish it, I’ll send it to you with a request to submit it to the severest criticism. . . . I miss

my Paris friends very much. . . . My mind goes back to your flat in Paris: how cosy it was and how easy it was to talk to both of you! I shall never forget how very kind you have been to me. . . . (1921.)

". . . Many thanks for your nice, kind, affectionate letter. I rejoice with all my heart that you have again sat down to work. You say you are thinking of going to the south, that Paris is expensive and cold. . . . Why not come somewhere down here—it's warmer and cheaper. Last summer, before I came to live here on the farm, I stayed a couple of times in a little boarding-house on the outskirts of St. Jean-de-Luz and paid twenty francs for everything. The food is excellent, the rooms, of course, are not luxurious but clean and pleasant, the landladies—mother and two daughters—are Basque, descendants of a famous whaler. They are nicely old-fashioned, very friendly, and I felt quite at home in their house. . . ." (1921.)

"It has been very cold. Now it's the rainy season, the sea is raging. . . . I feel depressed and I am longing for the spring—maybe it will chase away my anguish. To-day I started writing, but I cannot find the words to express thought, to draw an image. . . ." (1922.)

"Your letter made me infinitely happy. Thank you so much for all you have done for me. . . . I have started on the novelette I had in mind, but it is hard going. The weather is frightful, storms and rains. Perhaps the spring and the sun will bring some relief but just now I am sick at heart and terribly lonely. . . . I shall be very grateful if you let me know when my short story will be printed in the *Northern Lights*, and where I can buy that journal. I

## HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS

am looking forward with impatience to seeing you again in Paris. . . ." (1923.)

As a matter of fact, I did not know him well: we met seldom, for we lived in different places; before the Revolution I had never seen him, and I have not much information about his past life in Russia. Before the war he was a major-general and commanded the Imperial Fusiliers; in 1917 he retired and settled down in the country, in the Voronezh province, where the peasants, oddly enough, asked him to stand as their candidate for the Constituent Assembly; when the Bolshevik terror began he escaped to France and spent most of the time near his father, Prince Alexander Petrovich, in that farm near Bayonne (which, incidentally, he finally gave to his former batman who had left Russia with him and remained with him, nearly up to his death, as a servant and a friend). I do not know his character any more fully than the facts of his life. Lord only knows— it might well be that in addition to the traits I knew he had some others as well. But what I knew was beautiful: a "truly exceptional kindness", a "nobility of heart" the like of which is rarely found in any man, an extraordinary simplicity and delicacy, an exceptional capacity for friendship, a passionate, untiring striving after all that gives the human heart some peace and love, some light and joy. . . .

He lived at first in a suburb of Paris, and it was at that time that we met most frequently; then, as I have already mentioned, he moved to Bayonne. Quite unexpectedly, to our great surprise, he married a second time. One day I met him at the consulate (this was before France had recognized the Bolsheviks, so that the embassy in the rue

de Grenelle was still at the disposal of the émigrés), and he embraced me with particular affection and said:

Don't be surprised, I'm going to introduce you to my fiancée. . . . We have come here to go through some formalities necessary for our marriage." His married life was brief this time again. Nor did he live long after that. A year later my wife and I went to Vance, near Nice, to look for a house for the summer, and suddenly we saw him sitting alone in a café on the square. As soon as he caught sight of us he jumped up in surprise and hurried towards us.

"My God, how glad I am to see you! This is an unexpected joy!"

"But why are you here yourself?"

He burst into tears.

"You see, I didn't even embrace you or kiss Vera Nikolaevna's hand. They've suddenly discovered that I have consumption and sent me here for treatment, hoping the south would save me. . . ."

The south did not help. He moved to Paris and spent his last winter in a sanatorium. But the sanatorium was of no help either. In the spring he was taken back to the south, to the Riviera, where he soon died in poverty and completely alone.

That winter he paid me his last visit. He wrote asking for permission to come. "I beg you, if this is at all possible for you, to tell me where I can see you on very important business." Soon, one evening, he arrived half alive, out of breath and soaking wet from the rain. And his business turned out to be of such a nature that to this day it hurts me to remember it: he was going to be placed

under guardianship and certified insane (all because he had given his farm in Bayonne to his batman), and he had now come to me with the request that I should write some kind of certificate saying that I considered him to be in full possession of his faculties.

"But for God's sake, Pyotr, what good is a certificate made out by me?"

"Ah, you've no idea how useful it can be! Please write it, if you feel you can."

I wrote it, of course. But very soon death relieved him of all our certificates.

His coffin is still standing in the vault of the Russian Church in Cannes, awaiting the return to Russia, a peaceful rest in his native earth.

## Kuprin



IT WAS very long ago that I first heard of his existence and saw his name in the periodical *Russian Wealth*—the name which in those days everybody stressed on the first syllable. That way of stressing, as I saw later, annoyed him to such an extent that he would screw up his small eyes like a kind of wild beast, as he always did in moments of anger, and would mutter fiercely in his staccato patter, so typical of the Russian army officer:

"I am Kuprin and I must ask you to remember that. I wouldn't advise anybody to sit down on a hedgehog with no trousers on."

How much of the wild beast there was about him in those days—his sense of smell, for instance, which was remarkable—and how much of the Tatar!

He was so secretive about some things concerning his personal life that in spite of the many years of our friendship I do not know very much about his past. I know that he was educated in Moscow, first in the Cadet School, then in the Alexander Military School; for a short time he served as a young officer on the Russian-Austrian frontier; and after that what were the things he did not do? He trained as a dentist, worked in various offices, then in a factory, was a surveyor, an actor, a minor journalist. . . . His father, I believe, was an army doctor,



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owing to which Kuprin was admitted into the Cadet School. He died early and his widow found herself so destitute that she had to go and live in the Widows' Home in Moscow. I know about her that she came from some princely family with a Tatar name, and I saw that Kuprin was very proud of his Tatar blood. At one time (at the height of his fame) he even took to wearing a bright-coloured Tatar skull-cap which he kept on in his friends' houses or in restaurants, where he sat with the stolid, important air which befitted a proper khan, screwing up his eyes till they were like narrow slits. It was a time when editors of newspaper's and periodicals chased him in cabs from restaurant to restaurant, where he spent days and nights on end in the company of friends and chance acquaintances, and humbly begged him to accept a thousand or two thousand roubles in advance in exchange for a mere promise that he would remember them one day at his convenience. Massive, big-faced, he sat in silence, screwing up his narrow eyes, and suddenly hissed out, "I o hell with you," in such a sinister whisper that people of a timid nature vanished as though swallowed up by the earth. But even at that period—his worst—there was in him much that was very different and just as characteristic: together with great pride there was an unexpected modesty, together with bad temper and insolence—great kindness of heart, lack of malice, a shyness which often was almost pathetic, naïveté, simple-heartedness (even though this was partly put on), a boyish gaiety, and the endearing monotony with which he kept proclaiming his love for dogs, fishermen, the circus, the famous animal-trainer Durov, the wrestler Poddubny—

and for Pushkin, Tolstoy (at which point he inevitably spoke of Vronski's horse, "the enchanting, divine Frou-Frou") and Kipling as well. In recent years critics have often compared Kuprin to Kipling. The comparison, of course, is ill chosen: Kipling in some of his work reached the heights of real genius, and as a poet he was so great and original that he cannot be compared to anybody else. But that Kuprin could love him was perfectly understandable.

I backed Kuprin without hesitation as soon as his short stories appeared for the first time in *Russian Herald*, and I was therefore very glad to hear, when I was living with the writer Fedorov in Lutsk, near Odessa, that Kuprin had come to stay with Kuychev, who was sharing Fedorov's house. Fedorov and I immediately went over to make his acquaintance. But, although it was raining, we did not find him at home. "He's probably gone for a swim," we were told. We ran down to the beach and saw a man clumsily scrambling out of the water. He was about thirty, rather stout and pink of body, with short-cropped brown hair. He peered at us with short-sighted, narrow eyes. "Are you Kuprin?"—"I am. And who are you?" We introduced ourselves and he immediately beamed with a friendly smile and energetically shook our hands with his small hand (of which Chekhov once said to me, "A talented hand"). We became friends surprisingly quickly. At that time there was so much cheerfulness and good-heartedness in him that to every question, except those that touched upon his family or childhood, he replied with the greatest haste and willingness. "Where I come from? From Kiev. Served in the army at the Austrian frontier. I've left the army now, although I still consider

the rank of an officer the most honourable of all. I lived and shot grouse in Polesye—you cannot imagine what it means to go shooting grouse before dawn. Then I wrote all kinds of muck for a couple of kopeks, for a little Kiev paper, and lived in the slums among the worst riffraff. What I'm writing now? Nothing. Can't think of anything to say. And yet I'm in a dreadful fix: look at these boots, they're so worn out that I can't go to Odessa in them. Thank God the Karychevs had the kindness to put me up, or else I'd have had to take to stealing. . . ." And having said all this in his abrupt, staccato mutter, all in one breath, he suddenly began to sing Rubinstein's *Epithalamium* in a pleasant baritone voice: "Let Eros, god of love write you."

During that wonderful summer we spent many warm, starry southern nights together, roaming about or sitting on the cliffs overlooking the pale, lethargic sea, and I kept trying to persuade him to write, at least for the sake of the money. "Nobody'll print me," he used to groan dismally in reply. "But you've already been printed quite a lot."—"Yes, but this time I feel I'll write such trash that nobody will want it."—"I know Davydova, who edits *God's World*, quite well. I guarantee she'll take you."—"I'm very grateful to you, but what shall I write? I can't think of anything."—"Well, for example, you know soldiers. Why not write something about them? For instance, something about a young private on guard at night, walking to and fro, lonely, homesick, thinking of his village. . . ."—"But I don't know village life."—"Never mind, I do. Let's make it up together." And so he wrote his "Night Relief", which we sent to *God's*

*World*, and another little story, which I immediately took to Odessa, to the *Odessa News* (for some reason, he felt too "frightened" to take it there himself), and for which I managed to grab twenty-five roubles for him in advance. He was waiting for me on the pavement, and when I emerged with the twenty-five-rouble note he could hardly believe his eyes. He rushed immediately to buy a pair of shoes, then hired a cab and drove me at a gallop to the Arcadia, a restaurant on the sea-front, where he treated me to fried mackerel and white Bessarabian wine. And how often after that, how many years, with what a furious staccato speed was I to hear him shout, when he was drunk: "I'll never forgive you for having dared to shower mercies on me, the barefooted beggar that I was. . . ."

Our friendship, which lasted for several decades, was altogether strange. Sometimes he was tender and gay, and lovingly called me Richard, Albert, Vasya, but all of a sudden, even in a sober state, he would flare up. "I loathe the way you write, your pictorial descriptions are a strain for my eyes." The only thing I value in you is your excellent style—and also your excellent horsemanship. Do you remember how we used to ride off into the mountains in the Crimea?" As to his drunken states—they were beyond description. In spite of his amazing health one glass of vodka drove him into such a condition that he would pick a quarrel with anybody who happened to be present. However, his savage temper was no more astonishing than the rapidity with which his moods could change. The better I got to know him the more I grew convinced that there was no hope whatever that he would

ever settle down to a regular, ordinary life or planned literary work. He squandered his health, his strength and his gifts with incredible extravagance, living anywhere and anyhow, with the recklessness of a man who does not care a hang about anything in the world.

In the first years of our friendship we met mainly in Odessa, where I saw him sink lower and lower, spending all his days by the docks or in the foulest kind of inns and pothouses, sleeping in frightful lodging-houses, reading nothing and having no interest for anybody except fishermen, circus wrestlers and clowns. It was a period when he said more frequently than ever that he became a writer by sheer accident, though at the same time I often heard him make, with passionate, voluptuous relish, many sharp and subtle observations worthy of a true artist.

Suddenly a great change took place in his life: he came to Petersburg, entered the literary circle, quite unexpectedly married the daughter of Davydova into whose house I had introduced him, and became the owner of *God's Will*, for Davydova died a few days after his proposal to her daughter. He began a new, comfortable life, developed quite lordly ways, was unreservedly accepted into the highest literary circles and, most important of all, wrote a great deal, scoring an ever-growing success with every book. At that time he wrote his best stories: "The Horsethief", "The Swamp", "The River of Life", "Sasha". . . With "The Duel" his fame reached its climax.

Fifteen years ago in Paris, at a time when he and his second wife had a flat in the same house as ours, he drank particularly heavily, and the doctor who came to visit him

gravely told us: "If he does not give up alcohol he has no more than six months to live." Yet although he did not make the slightest attempt to stop drinking he held out for another fifteen years, "as fit as a fiddle", as many people said. But there is a limit to everything, and so the exceptional powers of my friend came to an end. About three years ago, arriving from the south of France, I met him in the street and gasped: there was no trace left of the former Kuprin. He was walking with pitiful little steps, so small and thin and feeble that it seemed that the first puff of wind would blow him off his feet; he did not recognize me at once, but when he did he put his arms around me with such touching tenderness, with such sorrowful meekness that tears came to my eyes. I had long heard what the Parisian émigrés were whispering about him: "You couldn't find a kinder, gentler man. He is almost a saint, but rather odd." Now I could see it for myself. On one occasion I received a postcard from him—one or two lines scrawled in big, shaky characters and with such absurd omissions of letters as though they were traced by a child. . . . All this accounted for my never seeing him, never visiting him in the course of the last two years: God forgive me—I could not bear to see him in that state.

One morning in June, 1937, on my way back from Italy, I woke up as my train was nearing Paris. When I opened the newspaper brought to me by the attendant, I was stunned by the news, for which I was quite unprepared: "Kuprin has returned to the U S S R."

I experienced, of course, no political feelings about his "return". He did not go to Russia—he was taken there,

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very ill, already in his second childhood. And what I felt was only a deep sadness at the thought that I should never see him again.

### RE-READING KUPRIN

As I re-read Kuprin my thoughts went back to the days of his fame, and to his own attitude towards it. Others—Gorki, Andreyev, Chahapin—lived in a state of permanent intoxication by their triumphs, were constantly aware of them, not only among people, at various public gatherings, but also when they visited each other or sat in a private room in a restaurant. They sat and talked and smoked terribly unnaturally, forever stressing the exclusiveness of their company and their supposed mutual friendship by sticking into every sentence: "thou, Alexey; thou, Fedor; thou, Leonid. . . ." Whereas Kuprin, even at a time when his fame inside Russia was hardly inferior to that of Gorki and Andreyev and even Chahapin, bore it with such ease as if nothing new had occurred in his life. He seemed to attach no importance to it whatever, and he remained inseparable with the same old pals, or else struck up new friendships of the same kind, as in the case of the tramp and drunkard Manych. Money and fame, it seemed, had brought him one thing only: the possibility to do in life exactly as he pleased, to burn his candle at both ends, and send everything and everybody to blazes.

"I have pride, but no ambition," I once remarked in some connection or other.

"What about me, I wonder?" he said quickly, and for a moment he looked thoughtful, screwing up his eyes and

peering into the distance. Then he said in his quick patter: "Yes, I'm the same. I'm furiously proud, and that's why at times I'm so abjectedly shy. But as to ambition, I have no right to have any. I became a writer by sheer accident, for a long time I kept myself alive anyhow, and then I began to earn money by making up little stories: that's all my literary history. . . ."

He often said that he became a writer by accident, but this, of course, was untrue and was refuted by his own autobiographical confessions in "The Junkers". But what was true was that when he left the army and really earned his living "anyhow" he got paid by a small Kiev newspaper not only for journalistic work but also for "little stories". He told me that he sold these tales "for a few coppers but without the slightest difficulty". He dashed them off with careless ease, always "on the go, on the run", and always, owing to his talent, managing to satisfy the tastes of editors and readers. Then, just as cleverly, he continued writing not for the little Kiev newspaper any more but for solid periodicals.

I just said, "owing to his talent". I should have said, "owing to his big talent". Everybody knows in what milieu he grew up, where and how he spent his youth, and with what sort of people he mixed in later life. And—what did he read? Where and when? In his autobiographical letter to the critic Izmailov he says:

"When I left the army, my worst trouble was that I had no knowledge of any kind, either scientific or practical. With a greed that has remained unsatisfied to this day, I hurled myself on life and on books."

How much of that was true? Did he really "hurl him-



self on books"? At any rate, the phrase "to this day" is very questionable. All his mental development, all his education also took place "anyhow, on the run". Nevertheless, owing to his ability to pick up information, the standard of—what should I call it?—"civilizedness" of his writing was quite up to the average. It is also to be remembered that he drank heavily all his life, so that it is surprising that he was able to write at all, let alone write so vividly, vigorously and sanely, in short in complete contrast to the way he lived and to what he was in his personal life.

How he lived, what he was in everyday life is well known. And what is remarkable is the difference between the way he lived and the way he wrote. Critics have spoken endlessly about the "elemental" nature of his writings, about their "spontaneity", about the "primordial feelings" which they express and which constitute their charm. Similar things are said about him even now, as, for example: "What prevented Kuprin from becoming a great writer was the 'elemental' nature of his talent, his typically Russian lavishness, his exaggerated belief in 'guts' and instinct at the expense of conscious polishing . . . the fact that he 'never graduated at a conservatoire' as the symbolists used to say about the naturalists. . . . Kuprin, by nature, was not a man of letters, he did not find his inspiration in literary themes. . . . There was no duality either in him or in his characters. . . ." All this should be taken with a grain of salt. Is it true to say that there was no duality in him? His personal life was, indeed, "elemental", "spontaneous" and "instinctive"; for him "the ocean was knee-deep", as the Russian saying

goes; he took no care of his body, intellect, heart or reputation. All this was common knowledge. But as a writer he was different. Yes, he did "graduate at a conservatoire", whichever one it might have been. And, precisely owing to his gift for assimilation and the speed with which he got his hand in at writing, *what he learned was not entirely to his advantage.*

The fact that his books (not only of the early but even of the middle period) bristle with cheap banalities is only of secondary importance. "A stylish woman", "A posh restaurant", "The iron law of the struggle for existence", "His tender, almost feminine nature shuddered at the rough touch of reality with its grim needs", "Nina's slim, graceful figure and her little face in a halo of ash-blond hair floated continually before his mental gaze"—all this is but a minor trouble. The main trouble was that Kuprin's gifts comprised an unfortunate capacity to absorb and use not only small, external clichés but also big, internal ones. So this is how it went: The little Kiev newspaper wants something suitable? All right, I'll do it in five minutes, and I'm not squeamish; it need be I can dash off such phrases as "the setting sun lit up the tree-tops with its slanting rays". You want a story for *Russian Wealth*? Delighted to oblige! Here's "Moloch": "The factory siren emitted a long drawn-out wail announcing the beginning of the working day. The thick, hoarse sound, it seemed, was coming from under the earth and spreading low upon its surface."

Is not that an effective, quite a professional beginning? Everything is in its place, including the cheap rhythm of the two sentences, quite worthy of the rhythm of the

phrase about the setting sun with its slanting rays. Everything is *as it should be* in the story as a whole, as well; everything in it *conforms to the accepted models of the time*; it contains all that could be expected of a tale about the 'Moloch: the "tender, almost feminine nature" of the engineer Bobrov, whom his martyrdom in the service of capitalism drives to drugs, the capitalist "shark" Kvashnin, who marries off to an employee of his, an unscrupulous careerist, the above-mentioned "slim, graceful Nina", who is the daughter of another employee of his and with whom Bobrov is in love, all this with the purpose of making her his, Kvashnin's, mistress; then the revolt of the workers who, driven to desperation by hunger and cold, set fire to the factory. . . .

I have always been aware of the many good points of "The Horse-thieves", "The Swamp", "At Rest", "In the Deep of the Forest", "The Coward", "Captain Rybnikov", "Sasha", of the wonderful tales about the Balaklava fishermen, and even of "The Duel" and of the beginning of a "A Ditch", and yet even these stories contained many things that jarred upon me. Here, for example, is the last letter of the student who shoots himself at the Hotel Serbia in "The River of Life": "I am not the only one to perish of this moral infection. . . . All the past generation grew up in the spirit of devout silence, of compulsory respect for their elders. They had no personality and no voice. Accursed be that foul time, the time of silence and poverty, that smug, peaceful existence under the shelter of pious reaction." If this is not "literature", what is it? For a long time after that I did not read him any more, and when I decided to do so again, I felt distressed at

once. At first I only glanced through the pages and noticed a number of marks I had made on the margins. Here are some of the passages which I had marked:

"It was a terrible and fascinating picture (the picture of the factory). Here human toil had the relentless regularity of a gigantic, solid machine. A thousand human beings gathered here from all over the world to give, in obedience to the iron law of the struggle for existence, their entire strength, their health, intelligence and energy for one step forward on the path of industrial progress." ("Moloch.")

"The entire opposite corner was occupied by a large stove. Two little children's heads hung over the top of it, with hair bleached by the sun. . . . In the corner under the ikons stood a large bare table, and above it, suspended from the ceiling by a metal hook, hung a wretched lamp with a grimy chimney. The student sat down by the table and instantly felt depressed and bored, as though he had been sitting there for many, many painful hours of enforced idleness. . . ."

"When he finished his tea he [the peasant] crossed himself, turned the cup upside down, and carefully put back the remaining tiny piece of sugar into a little tin. . . ."

"A fly beat against the window-pane, humming persistently an endless, wearisome complaint. . . ."

" 'To what end is this life?' he [the student] said, hot tears standing in his eyes. 'What good does this miserable, inhuman vegetation do to anyone? What sense is there in the sickness and death of poor innocent children, whose blood is being drained by the hideous vampire of the swamp?' " ("The Swamp.")

"A strange sound suddenly broke the deep silence of the night. . . . It echoed through the wood, very low, just above the ground, and died away. . . ." ("In the Deep of the Forest.")

"He would open his eyes, and the fantastic sounds would transform themselves into the familiar squeak of the sledge runners and the tinkling of the sledge bells, while to the right and left, as always, extended sleepy white fields, and in front of him the black bent back of the driver stood up as before, and, as before, the horses' croups swung monotonously as they swished their knotted tails. . . ."

"Allow me to introduce myself: the local police inspector and, so to speak, the Thunderer—Irisov, Pavel Afinogenovich." ("The Jewess.")

Truly it would have been difficult not to notice these hackneyed phrases, used and re-used a thousand times—these children's heads invariably hanging over the top of a stove, the eternal bitten-off piece of sugar, the fly humming a wearisome complaint, the Chekhovian student, the Turgenevian "strange sounds echoing through the wood", Tolstoyan "slumber in the sleigh" (" . . . and, as before, the horses' croups swung monotonously . . ."), and the Thunderer-police inspector, whose surname is inevitably either Irisov or Hyacinthov, and whose patronymic is sure to be Afinogenovich or Ardalionovich. . . . And then again, in "Small Fry", the conversation, as Chekhovian as can be, between the teacher and the medical assistant, lost somewhere in the northern snows.

"At times it seemed to the teacher that since he could remember himself he had never left Ku<sup>z</sup>ha . . . that it

was only in a long-forgotten fairy-tale or in a dream, that he had ever heard of another life where there were flowers, kindly civil people, intelligent books, soft women's voices and smiles. . . .

"I have always thought, Sergei Firsiych,' said the teacher to the medical assistant, 'that it is a good thing to be of some—even of the tiniest—use. For instance, when I look at a beautiful building, a palace or a cathedral, and think to myself, "Let the name of the architect remain immortal for ever and ever," I rejoice in his fame and feel no jealousy whatever. But on the other hand, the humblest bricklayer who also loved his work and carefully layed a brick and covered it with lime—couldn't he, too, feel happy and proud? And so I often think that you and I are tiny people, small fry, admittedly, but if one day humanity becomes free and beautiful . . .'"

In the story "Narcissus" I marked the description of a distinguished salon with some baroness or other and her friend Betsy—yes, inevitably Betsy; and further on, the evening when "the approaching storm could be felt in the thick, hot air" and the first kiss between two lovers, which had been associated by a thousand authors with an "approaching storm".

In "A Ditch" I marked the passage where "little flames lit up in the long green Egyptian eyes of the artist", whose singing so transported the young ladies in the brothel that the author himself exclaims quite seriously: "Such is the power of genius!"

Then I began to read the text in the first volume that fell into my hand, and felt even more distressed. The book opened with a story entitled "In a Siding" which has the

following plot: three people are travelling in the same compartment—a young man, a young woman “with a very slim, elegant figure and ash-blonde hair streaming in the wind”, and her civil-servant husband, a repulsive old man depicted in extremely biting terms: “Monsieur Yavorski could not and would not speak about anything except his own person, and his own rheumatism and piles, and regarded his wife as his lawful property. . . .” The old man lectures and nags his unfortunate “property” day and night. Growing jealous of the young man, he begins to be rude to him as well, thereby finning the love that had begun to kindle between the two young people, and which at long last they confess to each other just as their train stops at a siding, alongside another going in the opposite direction. Having made the confession, they run across the rails and board the other train, deciding to abandon the old man and stay together. Here the young man exclaims passionately, “For ever? For all our lives?” and the young woman “in lieu of an answer buries her face on his chest”.

Then I re-read what I had most forgotten: “Solitude”, “Sacred Love”, “Night Lodgings”, and the stories of army life: “Night Relief”, “The Campaign”, “The Inquest”, “The Wedding”. The first three again turned out to be rather feeble both in plot and in execution: they were written in a manner imitative of Maupassant and Chekhov, and again they were too neat and smooth and “competent”. “. . . Vera Lvovna was seized by an overwhelming desire to cling to her husband as tightly as possible, to bury her head on the strong chest of that man, who was so close to her, and to feel his warmth. . . .

Light little clouds kept passing across and round the brilliant moon, suddenly lighting up with a fantastic golden glow. . . . For the first time in her life Vera Lvovna experienced the terrifying knowledge which sooner or later is bound to come to every sensitive, thoughtful human being—the knowledge of the pitiless, impenetrable barrier which stands for ever between people even when they are closest to each other. . . . ” In all this, every word is cheap. But the stories of army life were very different, and as I read them I kept exclaiming to myself, “That’s excellent!” Here, too, one saw excessive neatness, smoothness and skilfulness, but it all reached the level of genuine craftsmanship, it was all of a completely different standard; “The Wedding” in particular, which, contrary to the other stories, never made you think, “Oh dear, how much there is in this of Chekhov or of Tolstoy”—a very cruel story, with a flavour of virulent caricature, but truly brilliant. And when I reached the stories written at the peak of his career (“The Horse-thieves”, “The Swamp” and some others) I simply took no notice of their defects, even though some of them were serious: sometimes it was a cheap idealism, the visible desire to keep up with the spirit of the time; in other instances, a very obvious effort to impress the reader with a dramatic plot or with brutal realism. But I did not think of the flaws and wholeheartedly enjoyed the various qualities which were preponderant in these short stories; the freedom, vigour and vividness of the narrative, and the excellent style, sharp, rich but never excessively lavish.

The following was written by the well-known critic Pilski, who was a close friend of Kuprin’s for many years:



"Kuprin was frank, direct, quick in his replies; he had a joyous and openhearted impulsiveness and artlessness, a warm kindness to all living things. . . . At times his grey-blue eyes lit up with a wonderful light, the wings of talent shone and fluttered in them. . . . Up to the very last years of his life he yearned for complete independence, for heroic daring, he was in love with 'the age of iron, of eagles and of giants'. He was naive, diligent and cruel. . . ."

No doubt more will be written in the same bad taste. People will speak time and again about his "elemental, animal" spirit, about his love of nature, of horses, dogs, cats and birds. . . . There is some truth in all this, however, and when I spoke about the difference between Kuprin the writer and Kuprin the man—on whose characteristics nearly all who knew him agreed—I did not mean to say that the man never revealed himself in the writer. He did reveal himself, of course, and did so more and more as years went on. "A warm kindness to all living things", or, as another critic put it, "Kuprin's blessing upon the entire world"—that existed as well. But we should remember that it existed only in the last period of his life and work.

## The Semenov and Bunin Families

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OVER A hundred years have passed since the birth of P. P. Semenov-Tian Shanski, a Russian scientist of world-wide repute. The centenary was celebrated by his admirers in England, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and other countries, but in France it passed completely unnoticed, and I was only reminded about it by his son, V. P. Semenov-Tian-Shanski, who is an émigré in Finland and, being a distant cousin of mine, writes to me sometimes. It was from him that I heard of the sad fate that befell the extensive memoirs left by his father. Only the first volume was ever printed, and only one copy of this exists outside Russia. V. P. sent me that copy to read, and told me the story of the second volume, which went to press in 1917. When the revolution broke out in October only eleven sheets had been printed, and that was as far as the printers ever got. As soon as the Bolsheviks seized power they introduced their own spelling and gave the order to destroy all the type of the letters they had banned from the alphabet. Consequently V.P., who was personally supervising the printing, was confronted with the alternative of either stopping the composition of the second volume or allowing it to be finished in the new spelling, thus bringing out the book in a very odd form. To avoid this, V.P. found another printing

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house which had secretly disobeyed the Bolshevik ukase and had not yet destroyed the condemned type. The manager of the firm, however, afraid of being sent to a Cheka prison, agreed to finish setting up the book in the old spelling only on condition that V.P. would obtain a written authorization from the Bolsheviks. V.P. made an attempt but failed, as was to be expected. He was told: "No, you will have to print your memoirs in our spelling: let everybody see from its twelfth sheet the exact moment of our victory. And besides, don't you realize that even if we gave you our permission it would be of no use to you, for, as you know, the old régime letters have now been destroyed? However, in the unlikely event of your finding a firm which has still kept them, we must ask you to name it immediately, and we will send its manager to a suitable place. . . ." So the book got stuck at the eleventh sheet, and V.P., who left Russia soon afterwards, never found out what happened to the manuscript. He could only tell me what is related above, adding: "In that second volume my father described his expedition to central Asia. It contained a great deal of valuable material as well as many pages that would have interested the ordinary reader for example the story of the meeting in Siberia between my father and Dostoevski, whom he had known when he was very young. Likewise, the third and fourth volumes contained a vivid report of the feelings and political ideas of various classes of society in the late fifties and described the epoch of the great reforms, Alexander II and his collaborators."

Dostoevski is mentioned also in the first volume, which was in my possession for some time. The pages about

Dostoevski are preceded by a description of the Petrashevski circle and of Petrashevski himself.

"We met at Petrashevski's house regularly every Friday," relates P.P. "The main reason why we liked going there was that he had a house of his own where we could spend a pleasant evening. He himself seemed to us eccentric, if not mad. He held the post of interpreter at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His only functions were to be present at the trials of foreigners and at the making of inventories of escheated property, particularly libraries. On those occasions he picked out all the prohibited foreign books, putting authorized books in their place, and so built up a library of his own, which all his friends and acquaintances were welcome to use. He was an extreme liberal, atheist, republican and socialist, and a striking example of a born agitator. Wherever it was possible, he preached the whole jumble of his ideas with extraordinary passion, though without any order or coherence. In the attempt to gain a new audience for his propaganda, he applied for the post of a teacher at a military school, declaring that he could teach eleven subjects. When he was called for a test on one of them, he began his trial lecture thus: 'This subject can be approached from twenty different points of view', and actually expounded all twenty—but did not get the job. In his dress he also showed extreme originality, wearing all that was frowned upon at the time—long hair, a beard and a moustiche—and walking about in a kind of Spanish *almaviva* and a four-cornered top-hat. One day he walked into the Kazan cathedral wearing a woman's dress, stood among the ladies and pretended to pray devoutly; his

somewhat brigand-like' countenance and black beard, which he had not concealed carefully enough, aroused the astonished attention of his neighbours; after a while the local inspector came up to him with the words: 'Madam, you seem to be a dressed-up man', to which he replied insolently: 'As to you, sir, you seem to be a dressed-up woman.' The inspector was so taken aback that Petrashevski managed to slip out of the cathedral."

"Our circle, on the whole, did not take him seriously," continues P.P. "But his parties flourished and new faces never ceased appearing at them. Those evenings were spent in animated conversations in which writers poured out their hearts complaining about the ferocity of the censorship, or reading their works aloud; papers were also read on an immense variety of subjects, both literary and scientific, all of them, obviously, with an interpretation that could not have found its way to print: fiery speeches were delivered about the emancipation of the serfs, which seemed to us such an unattainable ideal. Danilevski gave a number of lectures on socialism and Fourierism, which was his special hobby in those days, and Dostoevski read extracts out of *Poor People* and *Netochka Nezvanova* and poured out passionate accusations against the landowners for misusing their power over the serfs."

Speaking of Dostoevski, the author says that he first met him at the time when Dostoevski had just gained fame by his novel *Poor People*, had quarrelled with Belinski and Turgenev, had broken off completely from their literary circle and had begun to frequent the circles of Petrashevski and Durasov.

"I knew him for a long time and fairly intimately," says P.P., "and among other things I should like to say this: I cannot agree, for example, with the common belief that Dostoevski was uneducated, although widely read. I maintain that he was both well read and well educated. In his childhood, in his father's house, he acquired an excellent foundation, including a knowledge of French and German, which languages he read quite fluently. In the Technical College he systematically and diligently studied, in addition to general subjects, higher mathematics, physics and mechanics. This special knowledge was widened and completed by the vast amount of books he read. We can safely say that he was far better educated than many other Russian *hommes de lettres* of his time. He also had a better knowledge of the Russian people and of the countryside where he had spent his childhood and adolescence; he was, generally speaking, much closer to the peasants, to their life, than many of the wealthier noblemen-writers, which did not prevent him, however, from being very conscious of his noble birth and sometimes displaying habits that were lordly to excess. Much has been said and written about the poverty in which Dostoevski supposedly grew up. But that poverty was very relative, and it seems to me that what he had to cope with was not so much real poverty as the discrepancy between his possibilities and his desires. I remember, for instance, our life in the camp and the clumsy he made upon his father for daily expenses. I lived in a canvas tent exactly like his own; like him I had no boots of my own, received no tea from home, did not have a case to keep my books in, and had only ten roubles to last me for the

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whole duration of the training; and yet I did not worry, although I came from an expensive, aristocratic school. But for Dostoevski all this was a calamity, for he was desperately anxious to keep up with those of our comrades who had their own tea, their own boots and cases for their books, and whose expenses in the camp varied between hundreds and thousands of roubles . . .”

In the first volume of his memoirs Semenov often speaks of our Bunin family, to which the Semenovs are related, and in particular about Anna Petrovna Bunin, who died just over a hundred years ago. That centenary, also, was not remembered by anybody, and yet it well deserved to be. Taking into account the time in which she lived, one cannot but agree with those who considered her one of the most remarkable women of Russia. Besides Semenov's memoirs, we have some information about her in an article written very long ago by Alexander Chekhov. He says that nowadays Anna Bunin's name is mentioned only in books on the history of literature, and even then, perhaps, for the sole reason that her portrait is still hanging on the walls of the Academy of Science. But in her days she was widely known, her poetry was read and greatly enjoyed by the educated public, it sold very quickly and had enthusiastic reviews. It was praised by Derzhavin himself, read by Krylov in public, and enthusiastically acclaimed by Dmitriev, who was one of her close friends. Gretsh said of her that she “occupies a high place among modern writers and the first place among Russian women-writers”. Kuamzin remarked. “We have never had a woman who could write as forcefully as Anna Bunin.” The Empress Elizabeth Alexeyevna presented her

with a brooch in the shape of a golden lyre studded with diamonds, "for wear on festive occasions". Alexander the Blessed granted her a generous pension. Her collected works were published by the Russian Academy of Science. Her fame ended with her life, and yet Belinski himself remembered her and praised her in his literary portraits.

Anna's father was the owner of the well-known village of Urusovo, in the Ryazan province. Anna was born there in 1774. Semenov tells us that her father gave her three brothers what could be considered in those days an excellent education. The eldest brother was one of the most cultured people of his time; he knew several foreign languages perfectly and belonged to a masonic lodge; the two younger ones served in the navy, where one of them, during the war of Catherine II against the Swedes, was taken prisoner and sent by the King of Sweden to the university in Uppsala, where he got his degree. As for Anna, a great honour fell to her lot: she became a member of the Russian Academy of Science, though as a child she had received only a scanty education, for in those days the education of a young lady was regarded as superfluous luxury. She educated herself later through her own efforts and determination, when her elder brother began taking her to Moscow and introduced her to the circle of his literary and enlightened friends. She soon became a friend of Merzliakov, Kapnist, Prince A. A. Shakhovskoi, Voeikov, Zhukovski, V. L. Pushkin. In later years she was greatly influenced by N. P. Novikov and particularly by Karamzin, "to whom she owed her correct and elegant literary style". She pored over the pages of the *Moscow Journal*, of which he was the editor, then met him in



person in a society which called itself "The Debating Society of the Lovers of the Russian Tongue". This society was founded in Petersburg in 1811. It had twenty-four active and thirty-three honorary members which included Anna. Its founder was Shyshkov, and the members comprised Krylov, Derzhavin, Shakhovskoi, Kapnist, Ozerov and even Speranski himself. Its purpose was "to counteract the innovations introduced by Karamzin, to encourage a return to the masterpieces of the Slavonic tongue and to fight against the Karamzinian tendency". Oddly enough, Karamzin himself was one of its members.

The death of Anna's father brought about a considerable change in her life. Her share of the legacy provided her with a yearly income of six hundred roubles. She went to live with her sister, Maria Semenov; but, taking advantage of her newly acquired independence, she did not stay with her very long. In 1802 Semenov, her brother-in-law, went to Petersburg and Anna begged him to take her with him. Once she was there she refused to go back to the country. Her brother-in-law was "excessively shocked" and tried to talk her out of it, but she stood firm. She had given her desire to see her brother, who was a sailor, as the only reason for her trip to Petersburg. Now that she decided to stay in Petersburg, her brother also began to argue with her, but all in vain. Then Semenov returned to the country, her brother soon left on a campaign, and she found herself alone in the capital. In those days this was a most unusual situation, but she was not in the least put out. She even went further and rented a completely separate flat for herself on Vasilievski Island, "availing herself of the services of a respectable woman".

Having thus achieved what she wanted, she began to educate herself, "with astonishing activity and energy", in spite of the fact that she was already in her twenty-eighth year. She studied French, German and English, physics, mathematics and, most of all, Russian literature. Her progress was extremely rapid. When he returned from his campaign her brother was amazed by the scope and solidity of the knowledge she had acquired in his absence. However, all these efforts, although enriching her mind, ruined her financially: during her stay in Petersburg she had spent the entire capital she had inherited from her father. Her position was becoming critical and she ran into debt. At that point her brother hastened to introduce her to some literary men, to whom she showed her first writings. They met with approval and she was helped in having them published. Her first poem, "From the Sea Beach", came out in print in 1806. This was followed by a number of other poems which had such a success that she ventured to collect them and bring them out in a separate edition, under the title *The Inexperienced Muse*. The book was presented to the Empress Elizaveta Alexeyevna and the authoress was rewarded first with the already mentioned diamond-studded "lyre", then with a pension of four hundred roubles a year. That period was for Anna the beginning of real fame. In 1811 she brought out another book of verse, entitled *Village Evening*, which also sold out very quickly, and was followed by a new edition of *The Inexperienced Muse* in two volumes. 1812 brought her "the highest honours"; that year she came out with patriotic hymns, "winning thereby even greater good will and new bounties on the part of the monarch".

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This was to be her last joy. Soon afterwards she developed cancer of the breast, which turned the remainder of her life into continuous agony and which finally caused her death.

No efforts were spared to save her or at least alleviate her sufferings. The Imperial Court and Petersburg society, who valued her not only for her talent as a poet but also for her high intellectual and moral virtues, showed her great sympathy and concern. The Emperor expressed the wish that the most celebrated physicians of the time be summoned to her bedside, and the best possible treatment be assured; in the summer a country house was rented for her at the expense of the Imperial Court, and drugs were given to her free of charge by the "chief apothecary"; the Court doctors also visited her free of charge. At last it was decided to resort to a measure which was greatly believed in at the time, namely a journey to England, whose physicians enjoyed an unrivalled reputation. The Emperor again took upon himself all the expenses of the journey, and the whole of Petersburg saw her off "in great ceremony". But even England did not help. After two years' stay in that country, Anna returned to Russia as ill as when she left it. She lived for another twelve years, but wrote hardly anything new. She only brought out in 1821 a complete collection of her works in three volumes, which was rewarded by the Court with a life pension of two thousand roubles a year. She lived those last years partly with relatives in the country, partly in Lipetzk and in Caucasian spas, seeking everywhere some relief from her suffering. The cancer had gone so far in its destructive work that she could not lie down any

more but "spent most of the time in the only position that was bearable for her, namely on her knees". So, on her knees, she wrote: "Now, oh my neighbours, you are free at last, to give me love or not, to pity me or not."

She spent the last days of her life translating the sermons of Blair and reading the Bible. She died on 4th December, 1829, in the village of Denisovka, in the house of her nephew D. M. Bunin, and was buried in Urusovo, where she was born. The modest tombstone, which was once restored by P. P. Semenov-Tian-Shanski, may still be standing on her grave. In his memoirs he quotes the charming dedication which Anna Bunin wrote on a little book bound in red morocco—a copy of her translation of Blair's sermons:

"To dear Petia Semenov in the hope of an illustrious manhood."

## Ertel



**H** E DIED over forty years ago and is now almost completely forgotten. In fact many people have not even heard of him. He was an amazing man who was forgotten amazingly quickly. We all remember his friends and contemporaries—Garshin, Uspenski, Korolenko, Chekhov. And yet, on the whole, he was no smaller than they—with the exception of Chekhov, of course—and in some ways he was even bigger.

One fine, frosty day in Moscow I sat in the study of his sunny flat in Vozdvizhenka Street, and thought as I always did when I saw him:

“How wise he is, how much talent there is in his every word, in every little smile! What a mixture of virility and softness, of firmness and tact—a thoroughbred Englishman or Swede and a Russian cattle-dealer rolled into one. How likeable he is, how nice is everything about him: the tall, dry figure in the immaculate English suit, the snow-white linen, the large hands covered with reddish hairs, the drooping brown moustache, the melancholy blue eyes—and the amber cigarette-holder with the expensive cigarette, and the whole room sparkling with sunshine, cleanliness and comfort! Who would believe that in his youth this man was too shy to open his mouth in the humblest provincial drawing-room, as I did not quite

know what to do with his napkin, and made the most ridiculous spelling mistakes?"

Soon afterwards, in that flat, he died of heart failure.

A year later his collected works (short stories, novellettes and novels) were published in seven volumes; an eighth volume contained his correspondence. His novel, *The Gardenin Family*, came out with a preface by Tolstoy. The correspondence was preceded by his autobiography and an article by Gershenson, "Frtel's Philosophy of Life".

Tolstoy wrote about *The Gardenin Family* that when he began reading it he could not put it down till he had finished it and re-read some passages several times. He wrote: "The chief merits of the book—apart from the seriousness of the approach and apart from a knowledge of the life of the people, the like of which I have not yet encountered in any other writer—the inimitable, unprecedented merit of this novel is the amazingly correct, beautiful, varied and vigorous peasant language. Such language cannot be found in any other writer, old or new. Not only is his style forcible and beautiful, but it is also infinitely varied. The old manservant speaks in one way, the workman in another, the peasant lad in a third, the women in a fourth, the girls in yet another. Somebody once counted the number of words used by some writer or other. I think that in Frtel's writings the number of words, especially of popular words, would exceed that of any other Russian writer; and what true and good and vigorous words they are, too!—words that are used by the people alone. And in no instance is a word over-stressed, its exceptional quality is never over-emphasized.

One never gets the feeling—as one so often does with other writers—that he is showing off and trying to impress the reader with a racy expression he happened to overhear somewhere.”

That knowledge of the people will become fully understandable when we glance through Ertel’s autobiography.

“I was born,” he says, “on July the 7th, 1855. My grandfather came from a Berlin burgher family, found himself as a young man in Napoleon’s army and was taken prisoner near Smolensk. A Russian officer took him to the Voronezh province. He was soon converted to the Greek-Orthodox faith, married a serf and got himself registered as a petty citizen of Voronezh. He spent the rest of his life in that province, working as a bailiff on various estates. My father, who also married a serf, inherited his post. He had very little education but was fond of reading, particularly history, and was familiar with so called political problems and even, to a certain extent, with philosophy. To his outstanding qualities belonged a great kindness of heart behind a stern exterior, a certain sense of fairness and an extremely sober mind, almost identical to that of the Great-Russian peasantry. As to my mother—the illegitimate daughter of a landowner from beyond the Don—she was, unlike my father, inclined to sentimentality and even to a dreamy romanticism.

“She taught me to read, but I learned to write alone, at first copying printed letters out of books. Then my godfather, Saveliev, the landowner for whom my father worked for many years as a bailiff, offered to take me into

his house. His wife was French, an actress from some Paris theatre on the boulevards. She spoke hardly any Russian, felt very bored and grew attached to me, treating me rather like a toy and stuffing me with sweets. . . . All this did not last long, however. My father quarrelled with Saveliev, lost his job, and I returned to my 'original state'. We spent nearly a year after that in poverty, lodging with a peasant family we knew, until my father rented a farm. I was completely free to do as I pleased, to play with the village children and read whatever I wished. I was thirteen years old when my father undertook to 'get me used to firming'. By that time I knew the four rules of arithmetic, and had read *The History of Napoleon*, *Koshey the Immortal*, *The Travels of Pythagoras*, *Stenka Razin* by Kostomarov, the second volume of the *Museum of Foreign Literature*, Koltzov's *Songs*, the works of Pushkin, an old veterinary handbook on the treatment of horses, an illustrated volume of the Scriptures, and a comedy by Chiadaye, *Don Pedro Prokudin*. After that I taught myself to read old Slavonic, and re-read several times the 'Lives of the Kiev Fathers' and a few volumes of martyrology. . . . At the age of sixteen I met a merchant from Usman, by the name of Bogomolov, who supplied me with the work of Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.

"My father made me his assistant in the running of the farm, but I stood on such familiar terms with the peasants that my father sometimes threatened to beat me, and actually did so on two or three occasions. . . . I was accepted by the peasants as one of them, and was at home in the servants' quarters, in the stables, on the village



streets, at parties and at weddings—in short, wherever young peasants came together. At last my father came to the conclusion that my familiarity with the villagers positively prevented me from exercising the authority necessary for a bailiff, and he agreed to my applying for the post of a clerk on one of the neighbouring estates. . . . I saw a railway for the first time at the age of sixteen; Moscow and Petersburg—at the age of twenty-three. . . .”

What followed was, in those days, fairly typical for a self-taught lad yearning for the world and for progress: another friendship with another eccentric merchant who, “amid the filth and mediocrity of the tradespeople”, was possessed by a genuine passion for “progress” and for reading; a “hookish” romance with his daughter (who had undertaken the education of the young barbarian), soon ending in marriage; then an attempt to set up his own farm on a small piece of land rented with the tiny dowry of his wife, and the collapse of the attempt. “I, who had been considered an efficient manager on other people’s rich estates, proved to be no good whatever on my own small one.” Finally, in Petersburg (where he went thanks to a chance meeting with the writer Zisodimski, who once visited Usman), the beginning of a typical “writer’s existence”, among the most advanced representatives of the literature of the time—a life of such poverty that the young writer soon revealed the first symptoms of consumption, and of such enthusiasm for “advanced” ideas that he had to spend some time in the Peter-and-Paul Fortress, and after that in exile in Tver. At this point ended what was typical. What was altogether untypical

was the speed with which the young barbarian developed into a man of genuine culture, his astonishing growth as an artist, and, above all, the independence of his tastes, views and strivings, which even at the time differed in many respects from those of Zasodimski, Zlatovratski, and other "experts" on peasant life. "Even in the days of my infatuation with Zasodimski," says Ertel, "I never lost one of the traits I inherited from my father, namely common sense. For example, I felt that my knowledge of life—particularly of the life of the common people, of which Zasodimski considered himself the painter—was wider and deeper than his. I also understood human beings better than he did. This I owed to my past, my farming, my business dealings with merchants, peasants rich and poor, innkeepers, jobbers—in short, to all that which in me went alongside my love for the people, my grief over their needs and sorrows, and my enthusiastic faith in the hazy ideals of education, progress, freedom, equality and fraternity. . . ."

That "common sense" of his (to keep to that exceedingly modest expression) was precisely what made him so original and important a figure both in literature and in life.

Gershenson remarked quite rightly that "one cannot imagine a more striking contrast than that between the figure of Ertel and the flabby, anaemic intelligentsia of the eighties". His mode of life, as I have said already, was only for a short time more or less typical of the life of an intellectual from the lower-middle classes. Very soon it became again extremely untypical, even in its external forms. After his exile in Tver, Ertel spent only short

spells in Moscow, in Petersburg and abroad. He settled down again in the country and went back to farming, to which, almost to the very end of his days, he devoted half of his energy, first by running a small farm he had rented for himself, then managing huge, enormously wealthy estates for other landowners (there was a period when he looked after several estates at a time, scattered over nine provinces, "a whole kingdom", as he wrote to me).

Gershenson also thought very highly of him as a thinker, and described his philosophy of life as an "extremely original and valuable system of ideas". The strength of his thinking, he said, lay in the field reserved by Kant to "practical reason". Ertel was above all a man of action, endowed by nature with exceptional vitality, a "maker of life", driven by a burning urge to take part in the endless change of actions and events. This determined his entire philosophy of life, which was an answer to the twofold question: what does life *allow*, and what does it *demand*? He never sought to answer the fundamental questions about the force that moves the world or about the final goal of that movement.

He was not a rationalist, however. On the contrary, his intuitive grasp of reality taught him that beneath all things visible there lay something invisible, but no less real, and that to omit it in our practical calculations might well mean to miscalculate completely. For this reason he regarded positivism as insufferable nonsense. He divided all phenomena of life into two distinct categories: those that depend upon the will of "the Great Unknown whom we call God", to which we must submit ourselves

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unconditionally, and those that depend upon our will, those that are alterable and against which it is proper and necessary to struggle.

He believed in the existence of an absolute truth, but stood for a relative application of it. "In moderation, friend, in moderation," he used to say; that is—do not forcibly accelerate the forward march of history. He said: "*Absolute* understanding of good and evil, and *relative* activity aiming towards the realization of the former and the struggle against the latter—that is what is required for any form of action, including the action of protest." Does it follow, however, that he preached "moderation and tidiness"? Few people were less moderate or tidy than he, whose entire life was passionately immoderate, "a perpetual burning in affairs practical, social and of the heart, an exhausting pursuit of an outer and inner harmony". "I try in vain to arrive at a balance in my life," he complained. "But all I see around me and all I read wrings my heart unbearably, with pity and with anger." And further, speaking about his part in the relief work during the famine of the early eighties, to which he devoted two years of his life with such passion that he completely neglected his own affairs and found himself destitute as a result: "Once again I discovered that I was capable of being so carried away by social activity as to forget myself and reach complete exhaustion."

He criticized the Russian intelligentsia severely, particularly from the practical point of view. He used to say that their continual "protesting", determined either by "neurotic irritation" or by a "lyrical approach to things", was impotent and could not lead to any goal, for pathos in

itself was not an essence but only a form of expression; whilst the essence of all struggle and protesting was, in the first place, the personal and religious convictions of the protestant, and, secondly, *an understanding of historical reality*. "What the Russian intellectual needs first and foremost, is to absorb the teaching of Christ (which Messrs. Mikhailovski and Co. won't swallow), for without it one cannot acquire a religious and cultural personality; secondly—profound and serious culture and historical tact." He said: "We forget 'Liberal words' so often and so easily just because we perceive them only with our nerves. . . . The misfortune of our generation consists in their complete lack of any interest for religion, philosophy or art. Up to this day they have not learned to feel freely or think freely. . . . Man needs more than political forms and institutions—he needs 'the spirit', faith, truth, God. You will say: but they are still capable of dying for an idea. Ah, but it is easier to die for it than to carry it out! Even in the event of its victory, a society which only protests can do more harm than good. . . . Despotism is bitter, a thousand times bitter, but it is no less bitter if it comes from the moujik instead of coming from Pobedonostzev. *I can well imagine what the moujik would do if he were put in the place of Pobedonostzev!* As to our attitude to the people, there again we do not want any norms, except the moral norm which ought to determine relations between people in general, i.e. the laws of love laid down by Christ."

"It seems to me," he wrote in his notebook, in refutation of Tolstoy, whose views he shared in many respects, "that to distribute one's property among beggars is not

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the whole truth. It is also necessary to preserve all that is good in myself and in my children: knowledge, culture, a whole number of truly valuable habits, most of which require not theoretical but *hereditary* transmission. By giving away my wealth, shall I truly give all I owe to humanity? No. For in addition to my wealth, I owe to other people's labour a good deal more—and that surplus I must also share with my neighbour, and not bury it in the ground. . . ."

An *absolute* understanding of the truth and a *relative* application of it was one of his dearest beliefs. He felt with all his being that a rigid following of a principle is cold and deadly; that the warmth of life lies in compromise; that complete self-denial is as absurd as any other absolute application of the truth. "It is unnatural to love another's child as much as one's own. Let it suffice that one's personal feeling does not stifle one's sense of fairness, which stops us from murdering another's child for the convenience of our own. The norm is in the middle, where the shoot of personal life can grow and blossom out completely, but does not crush the love for all living things."

This man, amazing in his intense inner and outer energy, the freedom and clarity of his thought and the greatness of his heart, died too early. He was only fifty-two years old. But already then he believed with all his heart that "the meaning of all earthly suffering will be revealed *there*". In his adolescence he had gone through a stage of passionate religious faith; then came a period of "doubts, attempts to build up, in the place of the ever-waning faith in God, a faith in goodness, in revolutionary

and populist doctrines, in the teaching of Tolstoy. . . . But everything in me kept changing and shifting". In many respects he remained to his dying day a friend "of all liberties" and of the intellectuals of his time. Yet he saw life "in a new, ever-changing light". Goodness? Yes—but the word began to ring hollow; he felt he would like "to think it over carefully". Populism? But he saw that "populist dreams are dreams and nothing more". "Now, it would be an altogether different matter if one were to set up (with no politics whatever) some sort of gigantic union of educated people, with the purpose of helping the peasants in their various needs. . . . Before they can attempt to establish the Kingdom of God, the Russian people and its intelligentsia must begin by *living the foundation* for that kingdom, by building up in word and in deed some form of conscious and firmly rooted cultural existence. . . . Socialism? But do you not think that socialism can only be given to a people whose country roads are lined with cherry trees—and the cherries are left untouched. But when all that has been planted is a miserable shrub that promptly gets torn out 'just for fun', when for the sake of shortening a journey by a couple of yards a cart will drive through excellent rye—not necessarily the master's rye, either, but very likely belonging to other peasants—the only possible thing would be riots in the Stenka Razin-Pugachev manner, but certainly not socialism. And then, what exactly is socialism? Life, my friends, cannot be confined in shafts. Revolution? But in so far as it is violence, I loathe revolution. . . . All revolutionary destruction contains a pitiless annihilation not only of material things but of that which is sacred.

. . . And then again—what are material things? The wanton destruction of cherry orchards by a crowd run amuck is as revolting as murder. . . . Herzen has said already that it can be sometimes more heartrending to lose certain things than certain people. . . . Tolstoy? But driving everybody into Thebaid would leave the world dim and emasculate. . . . If there were no shadows there would be no struggle, and what can be more beautiful than struggle? The people? For a long time I shed tears as I wrote about them. . . .”

But years passed—and what did that lover of the people have to say? “No, I never yet understood Nekrasov’s phrase, ‘to hate while loving’, as well as I do now, plunged as I am into the hell of real, not imaginary, peasant life, into the delights of the incredible bestiality of their everyday existence. The Russian people is a profoundly unhappy people, but they are also profoundly evil, coarse and, above all, profoundly deceitful savages. . . . It has been estimated that several thousand revolutionaries perished during the reign of Alexander II; but if the ‘real people’ had been let loose, they would have dealt with these thousands in the manner of Ivan the Terrible. . . . Atheism? But a man without religious faith is a pitiful, unhappy creature. . . . The golden domes and the ringing of church bells are the external forms of the great essence which lives in every human heart.”

And here are the last confessions, written shortly before his death:

“The awful mysteries of God are inaccessible to my rational mind. . . .” “I believe that the meaning of human



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suffering will be revealed *there*. . . .” “I fervently believe that our life does not end here, and that in the other life all the tormenting riddles and mysteries of human existence will be resolved. . . .”

## Maximilian Voloshin



**M**AXIMILIAN VOLOSHIN, who died in the Crimea towards the end of the civil war, was one of the prominent poets of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Russia. Eccentric and somewhat comical in his manner and appearance, he combined many traits which were characteristic of the poets of his days: aestheticism, snobbishness and symbolism, a craze for the European poetry of the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, a Russian revolutionism and a heartless, purely literary singing of praise to the terrible, bestial, infamous crimes of the Russian Revolution.

After his death there appeared a number of articles about him, but they said little that was new, and little that could give any insight into Voloshin as a man and as a literary figure. Some confined themselves to words of praise, and to that which is nowadays commonly said about any author who mentioned the Russian Revolution either in poetry or in prose. Voloshin was pronounced a prophet who had foreseen the "coming Russian cataclysm" (even though for some of these prophecies familiarity with an elementary handbook on Russian history would have been quite sufficient). The most interesting remarks I have ever read about him were written by the famous painter Alexander Benois:

"His poetry failed to inspire that confidence without which true aesthetic delight is impossible. I did not believe him when he mounted the steps of beautifully sounding words towards 'the highest peaks of human thought'. But this ascension came to him quite naturally, and what attracted him were precisely the words. . . . In my feeling towards him I have always preserved a certain irony, which is permissible, however, even in the closest and most tender friendship. . . . His myopic eyes peering through his pince-nez clashed strangely with his Zeus-like demeanour and lent him something lost and helpless, something extraordinarily nice and endearing . . . With a singular simplicity of heart he was either acting the Medusa or trying to amuse the present masters of the Kremlin, when with a naive impudence he read to the face of the Soviet ideologists and rulers his most terrible poems full of accusations and tragic lamentations. The only reason why he got away with it was probably that they did not choose to take him seriously. . . ."

I had known Voloshin for quite a long time, but not intimately until I saw him again in Odessa in the course of the winter and spring of 1919.

I remember his first poems. Judging by them, it was difficult to foresee that his poetic, declamatory gift would, with years, so greatly develop and mature, both inwardly and outwardly. But the "attraction to words" was very characteristic of him at all times. When I first met him in Moscow he was already making notable contributions to the magazines *The Scales* and *The Golden Fleece*. Even then his appearance and deportment, his manner of speaking and reciting verse had been worked out with the

greatest care. He was of medium height and very stocky, with wide, square shoulders, small hands and feet, a short neck, a large head and dark-brown, curly hair and beard: all this, in spite of his pince-nez, he cleverly contrived to make into something fairly decorative, reminiscent both of a Russian moujik and of an ancient Greek, of an ox and at the same time of a scroll-horned ram. Having lived for a time in Parisian *mansardes* among poets and painters, he wore a wide-brimmed black hat and a velvet jacket and cape, and had adopted in his manner with people an old-world French vivaciousness, a sociability, an amiability and a kind of comical gracefulness; in short, something rather precious and affected—although he certainly had an innate predisposition to it all. Like most of his fellow-poets of the time, he was unfailingly ready to recite his own verse, at the slightest sign of interest, everywhere and anywhere and at any length. When he began reciting he used to draw up his heavy shoulders and throw out his chest (high enough though it was), revealing under the blouse an almost womanly bust; then, putting on the air of an Olympian, of a Thunderer, he would break into a powerful, languid howl. As soon as he had finished, he immediately threw off that redoubtable, impressive mask, and once again there would appear the charming, ingratiating smile, the soft, gurgling drawing-room voice, a kind of eager readiness to spread himself out as a carpet under the feet of his companions—and also his cautious but untiring and voluptuous appetite, if the scene took place in a friends' house, at supper or at tea. . . .

I remember our meeting, in Moscow again, at the end of 1905. Nearly all the prominent poets of Moscow and

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Petersburg had at that time suddenly turned out to be ardent revolutionaries (incidentally, with strong support from Gorki and his newspaper *The Struggle*, to which Lenin himself was a contributor). It was the time of the Bolshevik rising, and Gorki solidly entrenched himself in his flat in Vozdvizhenskaya Street. He never put a foot outside it, kept around him a permanent bodyguard of Georgian students armed to the teeth, and informed all and sundry that the extreme right-wingers were plotting an attempt against his life; yet at the same time, day and night, he received a multitude of callers: friends, admirers, "comrades" and contributors to the *Struggle* (which he was publishing at the expense of a certain Skirmunt and which promptly seduced the poet Brusov, who in the summer of that year was still delivering monarchistic speeches and demanding the erection of a cross on the dome of St. Sofia, then Minski with his anthem, "Workers of the World, Unite", and many others). Voloshin's work was not published in *The Struggle*, but it was somewhere round there, either in Gorki's or in Skirmunt's house, that I heard him recite something which for him was quite new:

*To the Russian people: I am the sorrowful Angel of Vengeance,  
I throw my seed into black wounds, into the ploughed-up virgin  
soil,*

*The centuries of patience have now passed My voice is a toxin,  
My banner is soaked with blood.*



One day at the flat of a fellow-writer I met his mother. I was sitting with Voloshin at the tea table when a woman of about fifty quickly entered the room. She had short grey hair and was dressed in a Russian peasant blouse, wide velvet trousers tight at the ankle and boots with patent-leather tops—and I nearly asked Voloshin who that ridiculous creature was.

I can recall various rumours about him: for example, that when joining his fiancée abroad he always arranged to meet her the first few times in the belfry of some Gothic cathedral; or that in his house in the Crimea he walked about wearing nothing except a "Greek tunic", in other words a long sleeveless shirt, which must have looked very funny on his fat figure with short hairy legs. . . . At that period he wrote an autobiographical note, reproduced in facsimile in *The Book of Russian Poets*, a copy of which I still happen to possess—a passage also quite funny in places:

"I do not know what of my life can be of interest to other people. Therefore I will enumerate only the things that were important to myself. I was born in Kiev on the 16th of May, 1877, on the Day of the Holy Ghost. The events of my life fall under three headings: countries, books, people. Countries: the first impressions—Taganrog and Sebastopol; the conscious existence of the suburbs of Moscow, the Vagankovo cemetery, the machines and workshops of the railway; my adolescence—forests around Zvenigorod; at fifteen—Koktebel in the Crimea, the most important and precious place in my life; at twenty-three—the desert of Middle Asia, the awakening of self-knowledge; then—Greece, the islands and coast of

the Mediterranean, the spiritual fatherland I found there; the last phase—Paris, awareness of rhythm and form.

"Books, my travelling-companions: Pushkin and Lermontov from the age of five; Dostoevski and Edgar Allan Poe from the age of seven; after thirteen—Hugo and Dickens; after sixteen—Schiller, Goethe, Byron; from twenty-four onwards—the French poets and Anatole France; the books of the past few years—Bhagavad-gita, Mallarmé, Claudel, Henri de Régnier, Villiers de l'Île Adams—India and France.

"People: only in the last few years have they come to occupy in my life a greater place than countries and books, I will not name them.

"I began writing poetry at the age of thirteen and painting at the age of twenty-four."

At that time I heard him recite another celebrated poem of his, dealing with the period of the French Revolution, which also contained a number of effectively theatrical lines:

*That supple, passionate body of mine  
Was trampled to pulp by the mob*

Soon afterwards the rumour reached us that he was taking part in the construction of an anthroposophic temple somewhere in Switzerland.

In the winter of 1919 he arrived in Odessa from the Crimea on the invitation of his friend Zetlin, with whom he stayed. He immediately began his usual activities: he read his poems at the Artistic Literary Club, then in a

private club, where nearly all the Moscow and Leningrad writers who were staying in Odessa read their works for a small fee to the "survivors of the capitalist class" who were eating and drinking in the room. In that club he recited many new poems about various terrible deeds and people both of ancient and of modern, Bolshevik Russia. I was amazed to see how much he had progressed, in his writing as well as in his rendering of poetry, how powerful and skilful he had become in both; yet at the same time I felt indignant at all that lavish display of self-adoration and, considering the circumstances of place and time, that blasphemous eruption of high-sounding words. And, as usual, I kept asking myself: What does he remind me of?

His appearance was formidable enough: the pince-nez glistened ominously, his whole body was drawn upwards, as it were; the thick hair, parted in the middle, curled up in ringlets at the ends; the beard was wonderfully rounded, the little mouth in the middle of it opened daintily—and yet it emitted such powerful, resonant roars and howls. . . . Was he a hefty Russian moujik of the days of serfdom? Or Priapus? Or a cachalot?

Next time I saw him at a party at the Zetlins, and he was again the "dear, kind Maximilian Alexandrovich". As I examined him more closely, I noticed that his physical appearance had coarsened and grown heavier with years; but his movements were still light and vivacious; crossing the room, he ran with quick, short steps; he spoke a lot and with great willingness, and all his being radiated sociability, benevolence to all and sundry, and perfect contentment with everything—not only with what



surrounded him in the light, warm, crowded dining-room, but also with the enormous and appalling events that were taking place in the world at large, and in particular in the dark, horrifying Odessa to which the Bolsheviks were already drawing near. With all that, he was poorly dressed, his brown velvet jacket was quite threadbare, his black trousers were very shiny and his shoes down at the heel. He was very hard up in those days.

The following are a few condensed extracts of some notes I took at the time:

"The French are running away from Odessa, the Bolsheviks are drawing near. The Zetlins have boarded a ship for Constantinople. Voloshin has remained and is living in their flat. He is strangely excited, livelier and more cheerful than ever. The other evening I met him in the street. 'I'm opening a hostel for men and women poets in the Zetlins' flat, so as not to be kicked out of it myself. We must act. We mustn't surrender to gloom.' "

"Voloshin spends many evenings with us. As pleasant and gay and animated as before. 'To hell with politics, let's recite poetry.' Among other things he read us his 'Portraits'. An excellent touch: he compares Savinkov's profile to that of an elk. He chatters on without a stop, as usual, touching upon an infinite variety of subjects, and only pretending that he is interested in his listeners. Of course he is full of enthusiasm for Block and Bely, and at the same time, oddly enough, for Henri de Regnier, whom he is translating. He believes in anthroposophy, and assures us that men are 'angels of

the tenth circle' who have assumed the aspect of humans together with all their sins, so that we must never forget that in every man, even in the worst, there is a hidden angel. . . ."

"We are trying to save the friends' house, where we live, from being requisitioned. Odessa is now occupied by the Bolsheviks. Voloshin takes a lively part in it all. He has conceived the project of a 'Neo-Realistic Art School' to be established in our house. He gives himself no end of trouble trying to obtain a permit to open it, and in five minutes has composed a signboard in very involved language. He pours out aphorisms. 'There are only two styles of architecture that I accept: the Gothic and the Grecian. They are the only ones that have no use for adornment.' "

"The painters of Odessa, in their endeavours to survive by any means, are forming a trade union together with the house-painters. The idea about the house-painters comes, of course, from Voloshin. He says enthusiastically: 'We must go back to the mediaeval guilds.' "

"A meeting (at the Art Circle) of writers, journalists and poets, also about the 'formation of a trade union'—very crowded, full of writing folk, old and young. Voloshin runs about with a beaming smile on his face, and prepares to deliver a speech on the necessity for all those who write to unite in a guild. Then, with his cloak over his shoulders and his hat dangling on his back (its band is fixed to the hook of the cloak), he gracefully ascends the platform with quick little steps. 'Comrades!' But a wild uproar immediately breaks out, with shouts and whistling:

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a furious row is started by a pack of young poets who have occupied the whole back of the platform. 'Down! To hell with the moth-eaten old scribblers! We pledge ourselves to die for the Soviet government!' Kataev, Bagrinski, Olesha are among the rowdiest. Then the entire gang, 'in sign of protest', leaves the hall. Voloshin runs after them: 'They don't understand us. We must explain ourselves.' "

"The hands of the clocks have been put two hours and twenty-five minutes forward, and it is forbidden to go out into the streets after nine. Voloshin sometimes stays with us for the night. We have a little stock of lard and alcohol; he eats greedily and with relish and talks and talks on the most exalted and tragic themes. Incidentally, from his speeches on freemasonry it is quite evident that he is a mason himself—in fact, when one comes to think of it, how could he, with his curiosity and other qualities, have missed a chance to join a society of that kind?"

"The Bolsheviks have invited the painters of Odessa to take part in the decoration of the town for the 1st of May. Some seize the opportunity with glee: you see, one should not shrink from life, they say; besides, 'art is the most important thing in life, and art is outside politics'. Voloshin, for his part, is quite entranced and launches into fantasies—how nice, for instance, it would be to spread enormous lengths of cloth over the streets and along the façades of the houses, decorated with rhombs, cones, pyramids and various poetical quotations. . . . I remind him that in the town he is so keen to decorate there is neither bread nor water, that raids, searches,

arrests and shootings never stop, that its impenetrably dark nights are full of lootings and horror. . . . In reply he makes a speech to the effect that in each one of us, be he a murderer or a cretin, there is a hidden, suffering seraph; that there are nine seraphs who come down to earth and enter into people in order to be burnt and crucified, thereby producing some kind of illuminated, incandescent countenance and what not. . . ."

"I warned him more than once to stop running after the Bolsheviks, who, of course, know perfectly well on whose side he was only yesterday. In reply I got the same kind of chatter as from the painters: 'Art is outside time and outside politics. I'll take part in the decorating of the town only as a poet and an artist.'—'But what is it you'll be decorating? Your own gallows?' Nevertheless, he went. And the next day we read in *Izvestia*: 'Voloshin is thrusting his services upon us. All kinds of rogues are now hurrying to grovel at our feet.' Now Voloshin wants to write a letter to the editor, full of noble indignation."

"The letter, of course, did not get published. I told him it wouldn't be, but he would not listen. 'They can't keep it back, they promised to print it. I've already been to the editorial office.' The matter did not rest there, however, and Voloshin has now been excluded from the '1st of May Art Commission'. He came and complained bitterly: 'This reminds me of the occasion when all the papers that had hounded me for having publicly dethroned Repin refused to give me space for an answer to their badgering.'"

"Voloshin is busy planning his escape to the Crimea. He burst in yesterday and announced gleefully that the matter is now settled, and, as it often happens, with the help of a pretty woman. 'Severny, the President of the Cheka, has billeted himself in her flat. Gekker introduced me to her, and she introduced me to Severny.' He is in raptures over Severny himself: 'A crystal-pure heart. He saves many people.'—'How many?' One out of every hundred that are murdered?'—'All the same, he is very pure.' Not satisfied with that, he also had the cruel naiveté to tell me that Severny cannot forgive himself for letting Admiral Kolchak (whom he maintains he was holding tight) slip through his fingers. . . "

"In his endeavours to get through to the Crimea, Voloshin has also secured the help of Nemitz, the 'Naval Commissar and Commander of the Black Sea Fleet', who, according to Voloshin, is a poet as well, 'particularly good at rondeaus and triolets'. They are now concocting a story about a secret Bolshevik mission to Sebastopol. The unfortunate thing is that there is no vessel to take them there: Nemitz's entire fleet seems to consist of one sailing-boat which cannot put to sea in any weather . . ."

Voloshin finally left Odessa on that sailing-boat at the beginning of May (counting by the new calendar), with a travelling companion whom he called Tatida. He brought her to us the evening before he left. In spite of everything, it was sad to see him go. The whole thing was sad: we sat in semi-darkness, with a little home-made oil lamp (we were not allowed to use electricity), and treated

our departing friend to a miserable fare. He was already in his travelling clothes: a sailor's jacket and a beret. His pockets were stuffed with various life-saving bits of paper for all occasions: one for the event of a Bolshevik search on leaving the port of Odessa, another in case they would meet the French at sea, a third for the White Army authorities, and so on and so forth (before the Bolsheviks had entered Odessa he had connections among both French and White Army officers). Nevertheless that evening we all, including him, felt far from calm, for who could tell how such a voyage to the Crimea on a sailing-boat would end? We talked for many hours and, for once, quite peacefully, agreeing almost in everything. After midnight we parted: the travellers had to be in their boat at the break of dawn. Very moved, we began hugging each other and saying good-bye, when suddenly, for no apparent reason, Voloshin started telling us how one winter afternoon he sat in Robin's Café with Alexei Tolstoy and how they decided to puff up their cheeks, slowly and gradually, with serious, almost fierce faces—first puffing their cheeks up and then, just as gradually, letting out their breath—while a crowd of bewildered spectators began gathering around them, wondering what it was all about. In conclusion, he gave us an excellent imitation of a baby bear.

He wrote us a postcard on his way, dated May the 16th.

"We have safely reached Evpatoria and have now been waiting here for two days for a train. We spent a day on the Kinburn Spit, another in Ochakov waiting for the wind; we were stopped twice by a French torpedo-boat,

tossed about a whole night without wind in a swell, were under machine-gun fire at Ak-Mechet, galloped a whole night through, changing horses, across steppes and decaying lakes, and are now stuck in this filthy hotel. Things are moving slowly but without any catastrophes. Have come across a mass of fascinating human documents. It is very nice to remember our last evening together, which finished off so pleasantly the whole unpleasant Odessa period."

Another letter, from Koktebel, reached us in November. I quote the beginning:

"Many thanks for your letter. It so happens that just these past few days I have been thinking about you constantly, and your letter came as though in reply to my thoughts.

"Leaving Odessa was only a beginning of my adventures. The Bolsheviks I have met and got to know since range from sailor-scouts to the Army Commander who took me to Simferopol in his private railway-carriage, passing me off for an old friend.

"After that I spent some time in my studio under artillery fire. The first White Army landing was carried out in Koktebel by the *Kagul*, with whose entire crew I was on friendly terms in Sebastopol, so that their very first visit was paid to me on my terrace. . . .

"Three days after the liberation of the Crimea I had to rush to Ekaterinodar, to save my friend General Marx who was unjustly accused of being a Bolshevik and in danger of being shot, and quite alone, with no friends or connections, I managed to obtain his release. This is something the inhabitants of Feodosia cannot forgive, and

I live here with the reputation of being a Bolshevik myself, my poetry, too, is regarded as Bolshevik.

"By the way: the first edition of *Demons Deaf and Dumb* was distributed in Kharkov by the Bolshevik 'Centrag', and now the White Army 'Osvag' in Rostov has picked a few poems out of the same book and is distributing them on leaflets. I got home only in July and could then sit down to peaceful work at last. . . .

"I am working exclusively on verse. All I wrote last summer I sent to Grossman for the Odessa publications, so you will have to get in touch with him about my poems on social subjects. In the meantime I am sending you for publication in *The Southern Word* two lyrical poems which I wrote last year and which have not yet appeared anywhere, as well as two short articles, 'The Paths of Russia' and 'Vodka Made of Blood'. For the last two months I have been working on a big poem about St. Serafim, all tense and worried as to whether I shall be able to cope with so grandiose a theme. It is meant to form a diptych with 'Avvakum'.

"I shall stay in Koktebel for the winter. This is made necessary both by my personal work and by the crazy prices with which no amount of fees can keep up. . . .

"I should very much like you, I.A., to read all my new poems—I mean those that are with Grossman. They are my attempt at a more realistic approach to our times. (In the cycle *Masks* the poems 'The Sailor', 'The Red Guard', 'The Profiteer', etc.) I am most anxious to know what you will think of them.

"I am still full to overflowing with the impressions of last winter, spring and summer. I really had a chance to



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study Russia from top to bottom, through all the political parties: monarchists, churchists, social-revolutionaries, Bolsheviks, Whites, brigands. . . . With all of them I had an opportunity to spend a few intimate hours in their own surrounding."

This letter was the last I ever received from Voloshin.

## The Third Tolstoy

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IN Moscow, where he recently died, he was often called "The Third Tolstoy", because there were two other Tolstoys in Russian literature: Count Alexei Constantinovich, poet and author of *Prince Serebriany* (a novel of the period of Ivan the Terrible), and Count Leo Nikolaevich. The third Tolstoy, author of *Peter I*, *The Road to Calvary* and numerous comedies and short stories, was known by the name of Count Alexei Nikolaevich. I knew him fairly well, both in Russia and abroad, in exile. He was remarkable in many respects, but what made him a truly astonishing figure was his exceptional lack of moral sense (which after his return to Russia made him an equal of his immoral colleagues who, like himself, had taken up the profitable career of service to the Soviet Kremlin), combined with outstanding natural gifts which included a genuine literary talent. After his return to Russia his writings became particularly abundant and varied, beginning with some infamous scenarios about Rasputin and the intimate life of the late Tsar and Tsarina. Altogether, much of what he wrote was incredibly vile and at times utterly stupid, but even at its most shocking it remained talented. For their part, the Bolsheviks were exceedingly proud of him, not only because he was the biggest writer they had, but also because, after all, he was a count and a

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Tolstoy to boot. Molotov himself said at some "Extraordinary 8th Congress of the Soviets": "Comrades, the speaker who preceded me was the famous writer Alexei Nikolaevich Tolstoy. As we all know, he was formerly Count Tolstoy. But now he has become comrade Tolstoy, one of the finest and most popular writers of the Soviet Land". (The last words were chosen by Molotov deliberately, for in his time Turgenev had called Leo Tolstoy "the great writer of the Russian land".)

As for the Russian émigrés in Europe, some contemptuously called him "Alyoshka", others with affectionate indulgence "Alyosha", and nearly all found him amusing: he was a humorous and interesting speaker, a first-class storyteller, he read his own writings extremely well, and was a delightfully frank cynic. He was endowed with a considerable, very alert intellect, and although he liked to pass for an eccentric, light-hearted devil-may-care sort of fellow he was in fact exceptionally clever and unscrupulous in looking after his own interests, though at the same time he was reckless and generous in spending money. He used the Russian language with rare skill, and knew and felt all things Russian as few men do. In his émigré years he often behaved like a proper "Alyoshka", a hooligan, and was not averse to visiting people whom he called scoundrels behind their backs provided they were rich; this was known to everybody and yet he got away with it: what else, people would say, can one expect from Alyosha? In looks he was aristocratic, tall and solid, with a clean-shaven, fleshy, somewhat feminine face; the pince-nez on a head slightly thrown back allowed him, on suitable occasions, to assume a haughty air. He dressed expen-

sively and well; walked with his toes turned inwards—a sign of a persevering, stubborn nature; and always played a role; the expression on his face and his manner of speech changed continuously; he spoke now muttering under his breath, now screaming in a piercing woman's voice; his laugh came out in unexpected bursts and he would look surprised himself and quack and choke, with his eyes starting out of his head. At other people's houses he was an insatiable glutton—he admitted himself that he over-ate and over-drunk outrageously—but on awakening the next morning he would immediately wrap his head up in a towel and sit down to work. He was a first-class worker.

Was he really a count? The Bolsheviks are crafty people, and the information they give out about his origin is undecisive and equivocal, such as the following:

"A. N. Tolstoy was born in 1883, in the former Samara province, and spent his childhood on the small estate belonging to his mother's second husband, Alexei Bostrom, who was an educated man and a materialist. . . ."

The above passage contains only one straightforward statement: ". . . was born in 1883 in the former Samara province." But where exactly? Was it on Nikolai Tolstoy's estate, or on that of Bostrom? We are told nothing about that: the only place mentioned is the one where he lived as a child. Besides, the strictest silence is observed about Count Nikolai Tolstoy, as though he had never existed. It is completely unknown what kind of man he was, where he lived, what his occupation was and whether he had ever seen, at least once in his life, the man who bore his name and who gave up his title only when, after having

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first émigrated, he finally returned to Russia. Alexei Tolstoy himself, in the many years I knew him and in spite of all his frankness with me, never breathed a single word about Count Nikolai Tolstoy. . . . However, the only reason why I touch upon the question of his pedigree at all is that up to his return to Russia he constantly waved his title about, exploiting it to the full in his literary career and in his private life. His passion for all the good things in this world was such that as soon as he returned to Russia, in order to curry favour with the Kremlin and the Soviet mob, he embarked upon the writing of his libellous scenarios, denouncing the "bourgeois" (i.e. the very people at whose tables, while he was abroad, he had dined and ~~wined~~ so enjoyably, and from whom he had "borrowed" money so freely) and making up atrocities which, according to him, were being perpetrated by the Russian "white-guards" in Paris.

So, to resume, we know the date of his birth and the place where he "spent his childhood". But what happened after that? Apparently the following—as told us by his Soviet biographers, who in their turn used data provided by Tolstoy himself:

"In 1905, during the first Russian revolution, he wrote revolutionary poems. The following year, when the Tsar's satraps were turning the whole country into a prison camp, he brought out a book of decadent verse, which later he bought up and burned. He felt that there was no returning to the past."

At that point begins shameless and very clumsy lying. It is indeed extremely odd: in 1905 he wrote revolutionary poems, and yet only a year later, just as "the Tsar's

satraps were turning the country into a prison camp", he suddenly came out with something so untimely as a book of "decadent verse"—which later on he allegedly started buying up and burning!

However, even that piece of information pales before what follows it: "The first world war raised for Tolstoy a mass of new problems and tormenting questions." My God! Only in Moscow is it possible to tell such silly, ridiculous lies! Tolstoy—and a "mass" of problems, *new* problems to boot! This would imply that he had been besieged by many problems previously, until some "new" ones arose in their turn, together with "tormenting questions". For my part, I have witnessed many a time how tormented he was by questions and problems: from whom to cadge some money to pay the tailor or a meal in a restaurant or the rent for his flat. But somehow I do not recollect any other kind of problem.

During the Great October Revolution Tolstoy "faltered": he went to Odessa and spent the winter there. In the spring of 1919 he fled to Paris. About his émigré years he says the following: "It was the most painful period in my life." In 1921 he left Paris for Berlin, where he joined the group of Soviet sympathisers. When he returned to Russia he wrote about the émigrés, about the barbarian state into which they were sinking, about his own émigré nostalgia. . . . He wrote about the nightmare of white-guardist murders and executions, about the Paris capitalists, doomed to destruction, and about his "disenchantment" at the sight of their carousals in night-clubs; he also wrote satirical descriptions of the life in capitalist America—a subject treated with such a

display of genius by the "great Soviet poet" Mayakovsky. . . .

Where was all this printed, and for whose entertainment? It was printed in the *New World*, one of the leading Moscow monthlies; and we, sitting in Paris, opened it and read: "Complete barbarization of the Whites", "The nightmare of white-guardist murders and executions". . . . But why should that barbarization have been most terrible in Paris, of all places? And who, precisely, was getting killed and executed? And how was it that the French Government should close their eyes to all that nightmare taking place in Paris? What also strikes one as peculiar is the Parisian capitalist class "doomed to destruction", and Tolstoy's "disenchantment" at their carousals—with which, we may therefore assume, he must have been "enchanted" at some time or other. . . . All this is very odd, because, after all, his disenchantment took place quite a few years ago, when he decided to escape from the white-guardist nightmare to Russia (where, of course, there were no "satraps" who turned the country into a prison camp, where nobody was ever murdered, nobody was executed!)—and yet Paris still exists, it has not died out and is instead gayer and more depraved than ever: so, at least, it was affirmed by a certain Zhukov, a Paris correspondent who sent to another Moscow monthly, *October*, an article entitled "In the West after the War", in which he informs his readers that on the Paris boulevards one perpetually meets monks who reek of perfume at a kilometre's distance, and "sauntering young men with curled and pomaded hair and ladies rigged up with stupendous finery". There used

to be a phrase in Russia: "He lies like a piebald gelding." Innocent, far-away days! Now after thirty years of relentless, daily, hourly practice of the "soviets" in the art of lying, the humblest Soviet scribbler, such as the above-quoted Zhukov, would give a hundred points to any gelding, piebald or not. Tolstoy, for his part, must have been killing himself laughing while he was writing his autobiography, relating his "émigré nostalgia", the "nightmare" which he saw in Paris, the "mass" of spiritual and mental torments he experienced during the "first Russian revolution" and his "faltering" and fleeing from Moscow to Odessa and from there to Paris. . . . He always was an easy, cheerful liar—although it may well be that in Moscow he lied with a slight break in his voice; if this were the case, however, I think it was an actor's trick: he was a natural actor, who never worked himself into the hysterical "sincerity in lying" with which Gorki, for example, sobbed all his life long.

I met Tolstoy for the first time during the years about which (lamenting over the "first revolution") Alexander Blok declaimed in such extravagantly tragic tones, "Children of Russia's dreadful years, we cannot forget anything", the years between that "first revolution" which took place in the autumn of 1905 and the first world war. I was then fiction editor at the *Aurora Borealis*, an undertaking started by a certain Countess Barbara Bobrinski, a public figure of those days. One day a tall and rather handsome young man made his appearance at the offices of that journal. He introduced himself ceremoniously as "Count Alexei Tolstoy", and submitted to me a manuscript entitled "A Magpie's Tales", which consisted of a few



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short trifles, cleverly put together in the then fashionable "Russian style". I accepted them without hesitation, for they were not only clever but were written with that peculiar freedom and ease which has always distinguished Tolstoy's work. Since then I have been interested in him, I read his book of "decadent verse" (which was allegedly burnt long previously) and then continued to read all he wrote. I soon observed how varied his writings were, how from the very beginning of his career he showed great skill in supplying the literary market only with what would sell well at the moment, according to the changing tastes and circumstances. I have never read any revolutionary poems written by him; neither have I ever heard Tolstoy himself say anything about them. Perhaps he did attempt to write things of that kind, in honour of the "first revolution", but he certainly did not persevere in this for any length of time, either because he found it too boring or simply because that revolution flopped pretty quickly (even though it allowed the moujiks enough time to burn and plunder many country manors). As to the "decadent" book, which I did read, I found, as far as I can remember, nothing decadent about it. In composing it Tolstoy had again followed the fashion of the day: it was a stylization of the old-Russian and popular fairy-tale manner. That book was followed by a number of short stories describing the life of the country gentry, which also conformed to the tastes of the day—burlesque, caricature, deliberate absurdities. It was, I think, at that period that he wrote several comedies adapted to provincial tastes and therefore very profitable. But then, as I have said already, he was remarkably quick at adapting himself.

Even his novel, *The Road to Calvary* (the beginning of which was first published in Paris in an émigré periodical), was in later years, i.e. after his return to Russia, so thoroughly adapted by him to Bolshevik requirements, that all the "white" characters in it got completely disillusioned about their past deeds and feelings and turned into ardent "reds". His other works are also known: the novel, *Breza*, written in glorification of Stalin; a piece of fantastic nonsense about a sailor who somehow got to the planet Mars, where he immediately established a commune; then a libellous lampoon about the Russian "sharks of capitalism", the former oil magnates who had fled to Paris, under the title *Black Gold*. As for the "Satirical Pictures of the Life of Capitalist America", I do not know what they are. Having never been to America, he must have obtained his information from such experts on the U.S.A. as Gorki or Mayakovski. . . . Gorki visited America in 1906 and with characteristic pompousness called New York "the city of the yellow devil", i.e. of gold (which, he maintains, he always hated). Gorki gave the following picture of that "devilish" town:

"This is a city. This is New York. From afar it looks like an enormous jaw with uneven black teeth. It breathes black clouds of smoke up into the sky, and wheezes like a glutton suffering from excess of fat. When you enter it you feel you are in a stomach of stone and iron. The streets are a slippery, greedy throat; the people floating down it are like dark pieces of food; the locomotives of the municipal railway are enormous worms; the railway carriages are fattened ducks. . . ."

After our first meeting at the *Aurora Borealis* I did not

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see Tolstoy for two or three years: I was either travelling with my second wife in all kinds of countries, including the tropical ones, or living in the country, and seldom went to Petersburg or Moscow. But suddenly Tolstoy paid us an unexpected visit at the Moscow hotel where we were staying, accompanied by a handsome black-eyed young woman of an Oriental type. Everybody called her Sonya Dymshitz, but Tolstoy himself referred to her as "my wife, Countess 'Tolstoy'". Dymshitz was dressed with elegant simplicity, whilst Tolstoy looked like a prosperous provincial bourgeois: he wore a top-hat and an enormous bearskin coat. I greeted them with the courtesy that the occasion demanded and bowed amiably to the countess, but when I turned to the count I could not restrain a smile.

"I am very happy to renew our acquaintance. Please come in and take off your magnificent coat."

In reply, he muttered carelessly:

"Yes, it's an heirloom. A memory of former greatness, as they say."

That coat may well have been the reason for our becoming friends so quickly: the count had a humorous, sarcastic mind and sharp powers of observation, and he probably caught the fleeting smile on my face and realized immediately that I was not to be fooled. Besides, he was always quick at making friends with suitable people, and after we met another two or three times he was already confessing to me with his quacking laugh:

"I bought that 'heirloom' second-hand for a few coppers, and the fur is moth-eaten, covered with disgusting

bald patches. But it certainly makes a grand-seigneur impression on everybody."

Speaking generally about the importance of clothes, he looked at me and made a face:

"You'll never make a success in practical matters. You have no idea how to sell yourself. Look how unbecomingly you dress. You're slim and of good height, there's in you something of a period painting. So what you ought to do is grow a long, narrow beard and a long moustache, wear a waisted frock-coat and shirts made of Dutch linen with artistic open collars tied with a large black silk bow, long hair down to your shoulders with a middle parting, let your nails grow to a wondrous length, adorn the index finger of your right hand with some kind of mysterious ring, and smoke small Havana cigars instead of these commonplace cigarettes. . . . It would be cheating, would it? But who doesn't cheat nowadays, in one way or another? You've often said it yourself, and it's true. One man's a symbolist, another a marxist, a third a futurist, a fourth maintains he is a former tramp—and everybody dresses up: Mayakovski wears a yellow woman's blouse, Andreyev and Chaliapin—peasant caftans, loose shirts and boots with patent-leather tops, Blok—a velvet jacket and long curls. Everybody cheats, my dear fellow. . . ."

When he moved to Moscow and took a flat in the house of Prince Sherbatov, he hung on the walls a few old, black portraits of some impressive-looking old men, and muttered to his guests with feigned indifference: "Yes, all this is ancestral rubbish. . . ." But to me he said again with a laugh: "Picked them up dirt-cheap at the Sukharev market."

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So up to October 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power, we met on friendly terms—but after that we quarrelled twice.

Life soon became very difficult, famine was beginning, to buy a minimum of decent food one had to spend a lot of money, and to earn money one had to be corrupt. At that time a "Musical Snuffbox" was started in one of the Moscow taverns; profiteers, card-sharpers and whores sat there devouring little cakes at a hundred roubles apiece and drinking revolting ersatz cognac out of cups, to make it look like tea (it was forbidden at that time to sell spirits), and poets and novelists—Tolstoy, Mayakovski, Brusov and others—read their own and other people's writings to them, picking on the most obscene passages, and pronouncing every unprintable word in full. Tolstoy suggested that I should go and read my work there, I felt offended and we quarrelled.

Soon Alexander Blok's "The Twelve" came out. As we found out later, when his diaries were published, Blok wrote shortly before the February Revolution in the following style:

"The mutiny of mauve worlds is quieting down. The violins that had been singing the praise of phantoms are now revealing their true nature. A bitter smell of almonds spreads in the rarefied air. A gigantic catafalque is swinging in the mauve twilight of the boundless universe, and on it lies a dead doll whose face resembles faintly the one that shone to us among the heavenly roses."

Or else, just as hellishly poetically:

"No sooner did my beloved become my wife than we were seized by the mauve worlds of the first revolution

and drawn into the vortex. I who had yearned so long for extinction was drawn into the grey-red-purple of the silver star, into the amethyst nacre shimmer of the snow-storm. When the storm passed it left an iron emptiness pregnant with a new storm. Now a hurricane is approaching—I cannot yet distinguish its colour or its smell.”

That hurricane was precisely the revolution of 1917, and soon even for Blok its colour and its smell became quite clear—though in point of fact even before that it did not take a particularly sharp sight or sense of smell to be able to distinguish them. The period of the Tsars ended (with the friendly assistance of the soldiers of the Petersburg garrison who did not want to go to the front), the power passed into the hands of the Provisional Government, and all the Tsar’s ministers were arrested and put in the Peter-Paul fortress. The Provisional Government, for some unaccountable reason, nominated Blok a member of the “extraordinary commission” set up for the investigation of the activities of these ministers. Blok, who received for that job six hundred roubles a month—a considerable sum in those days—took part in the cross-examinations, sometimes questioned the prisoners himself, and ridiculed them in his diary, as we found out when it was published, in the most revolting way. Next came the Great October Revolution. The Bolsheviks now put in the same fortress the ministers of the Provisional Government (two of whom, Shingarev and Kokoshkin, were killed there without trial), and Blok went over to the Bolsheviks and became personal secretary to Lunacharski, whereupon he wrote a pamphlet entitled “Russia and the Intelligentsia” and demanded: “Listen, listen to the music

of the revolution!" After that he composed "The Twelve" and entered in his diary for the benefit of posterity a pitifully unconvincing story about having written the poem "in a trance", "hearing all the while the sounds of the crumbling of the old world".

The Moscow writers organized an evening at which "The Twelve" was read and discussed, and I went to it. The reading was done by somebody, I do not remember who, sitting between Ilya Ehrenburg and Tolstoy: and as by that time the reputation of that piece of writing, which for some reason was referred to as a poem, was quite above dispute, when the reading was over a reverent silence fell for some time in the room, followed by a few muffled exclamations, "Wonderful!" "Amazing!" I picked up the text of "The Twelve" and, turning over the pages, said approximately the following:

"Ladies and gentlemen! You know what has been going on in Russia for a year, to the shame of the whole of mankind. Since February of last year, since the February Revolution which is still shamelessly called 'the bloodless revolution', the Russian people have been perpetrating unspeakable brutalities and senseless crimes. The number of innocent people murdered and tortured to death has by now probably reached a million. The Russian soil is drenched with the tears of widows and orphans. All those who have some time to spare have started killing: the soldiers who in 1917 stuck their officers on their bayonets are still continuing to murder people; they scatter to their villages and occupy the land belonging not only to the landlords but also to rich peasants; they make havoc on their way; they kill railway officials and

stationmasters from whom they demand trains which they have not got. A letter I had from my village, for instance, relates the following story: the moujiks plundered a manor nearby, then caught all the peacocks, plucked them and let them go—and the birds started flying about, all covered with blood, wildly dashing to and fro, with piercing screams, butting into everything on their way. Last April I went to the estate of a cousin of mine in the Orlov district, and there one morning the moujiks, who had set fire to a manor house nearby, wanted to throw me, who came running when I saw the fire, into the cattle shed which was ablaze, with all the cattle in it. A huge, drunken deserter who was in the crowd of peasants began to yell that it was I who set the cattle shed on fire, so that the whole adjoining village should burn down. What saved me was that I started shouting at the blackguard even more savagely than he did at me, and he was so taken aback, and the peasants who were beginning to press upon me became so confused in their turn, that I, straining all my will-power so as not to look round, got out of the crowd and walked away. And now N., whom we all know [I named him in full], has just escaped from Simferopol, where he says the workmen and deserters are walking literally up to their knees in blood. Among other incidents he tells me about an elderly retired officer who was burned alive in the firebox of a locomotive. Does it not seem surprising to you that in these terrible days Blok should shout to us: 'Listen, listen to the music of the revolution' and compose 'The Twelve'? And that in his pamphlet, 'Russia and the Intelligentsia', he should maintain that the Russian people were quite right when last



October they shot at the Kremlin cathedrals—trying to prove his point with an outrageous piece of slander on the Russian clergy, the like of which I have never yet heard: 'For a whole century,' he says, 'the fat-bellied priest, hiccuping, has been selling vodka in these cathedrals.' As to 'The Twelve' it is, indeed, an astonishing creation, but it is astonishing only by its badness in every respect. Blok is an insufferably 'poetical' poet, he hardly ever has a simple word, everything is beautiful beyond all measure, pompously eloquent. But suddenly, after having written countless deliberately mysterious poems, almost entirely incomprehensible, far-fetched, symbolical and mystical—he now comes out with something only too comprehensible. What a cheap, unconvincing trick: he takes a winter evening in Petersburg, so terrible just now, where people are perishing of cold and hunger, where even in daytime you cannot go out in the streets for fear of being attacked and stripped to the skin, and he says: look what the drunken, savage soldier-mob is doing—but in the end that saturnalia is justified by the complete destruction of the old Russia; and at their head, he says, goes Christ Himself, they are His twelve apostles, their essence is the same as His:

*Comrades, take aim and don't be scared,  
Let's blast away at Holy Russia.*

"The Bolsheviks are the bitter enemies of the populists; their revolutionary plans are based not on the countryside, not on the peasants, but on the dregs of the proletariat, on the city drunks and paupers, on all those who were

seduced by Lenin's advice 'to rob the robbers'. Evidently, Blok has decided to pander to the Bolsheviks to the full: ridiculing Russia, ridiculing the Constituent Assembly (which they had promised to the people before October, but dispelled as soon as they seized power), ridiculing the 'bourgeois', the man-in-the-steet, the clergy.

"The Twelve" is a collection of short rhymes, some pseudo-tragic, some written in the rhythm of a popular dance, and as a whole pretending to be something Russian and popular in the extreme. Above all, it is hellishly boring owing to its senseless wordiness and the monotony of its 'variety', the tiresome, exasperating, endless repetition of all these aie-aie, aha, hey-hey, oie-oie, tra-la-la. . . . Blok's intention was to reproduce in this 'poem' of his the language and feelings of the people, but what came out is clumsy and vulgar beyond measure. And as a 'curtain line' he flings out a pathological blasphemy: Christ dancing with a bloody banner, with a crown of white roses on His head, in front of all those beasts, robbers and murderers:

*They march with sovereign tread, a hungry dog behind them  
and Jesus Christ ahead, a blood-red banner in his hands, white  
roses on his head."*

With this I finished my speech. And it was then that Tolstoy kicked up a row. He turned on me like a fighting cock and yelled in theatrical tones that he would never forgive me that speech; that he, Tolstoy, was a Bolshevik heart and soul, whereas I was a retrograde, a counter-revolutionary, and so forth.

No less strange was another of Blok's famous works devoted to the Russian people, entitled "Scythians":

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"You are millions, we are numberless, we are legion. Try and fight us. Yes, we are Scythians, we are Asiatics, with slanting, greedy eyes."

The poem is a bad imitation of Pushkin's "To the Slanderers of Russia". The self-admiration is not original either: it is the eternal Russian swollen-headed bragging. But the most remarkable thing was that just at that time the multi-millions Russian army had disintegrated, ignominiously and finally, more completely than it had ever done since the existence of Russia, and the "numberless Scythians", so formidable and strong ("Try and fight us!"), were scampering away from the front. Soon the "infamous peace" was signed by the Bolsheviks in Brest-Litovsk.

In May my wife and I left Moscow for Odessa, comparatively legally. A year before the February Revolution I happened to render a great service to a lecturer of literature by the name of Fritshe, who was an ardent social-democrat. I intervened before the mayor of Moscow and saved him from expulsion for his revolutionary pamphlets. Now, under the Bolshevik regime, Fritshe became something like a foreign minister, and I went to him and demanded a permit to leave Moscow and travel as far as Orsha (beyond which lay the occupied territories). He was so taken by surprise that he not only hastened to give us the permit but even suggested that we should travel to Orsha in a hospital train which was going there for some reason. So we left Moscow—for ever, as it turned out.

What a frightful journey it was! The train had an armed guard, as a precaution against a possible attack by the last

"Scythians" scurrying from the front. At night it was blacked out and we travelled in complete darkness. The stations were indescribable, flooded with vomit and excrement, filled with wild, hysterical, drunken singing and yells.

That year the Bolsheviks ruled only over a small part of Russia. The rest was either free or occupied by the Germans and Austrians and with their consent and co-operation had an independent administration. The great exodus of people of all ranks and titles and of all ages began that year: all who could fled into the parts of Russia that were still free. And there, among the refugees, suddenly appeared Tolstoy. First his second wife, the poetess Natalya Krandievskaya, arrived in Odessa in August with her two children, then Tolstoy himself appeared. He greeted me as if nothing had ever happened between us, and shouted, this time with perfect sincerity and with more passion than I would have credited him for:

"You have no idea how happy I am to have escaped at last from those scoundrels entrenched in the Kremlin! I trust you understood that the only reason why I yelled at you at that idiotic meeting about 'The Twelve' and generally behaved so vilely at the time, was that I had decided long ago to bolt, and was trying to do so in the safest and most favourable conditions. I think that with God's help we shall be back in Moscow by next winter. However bestial the Russian people have become, they're bound to be aware of what is going on—the murder of the Tsar and his family, the executions of the Grand Dukes and other bestialities. On my way here, in the train and at stations, I heard such speeches made by kindly,

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bearded peasants, not only about all those Trotskis and Sverdlovs, but even about Lenin himself, that it made my flesh creep. 'Wait, wait,' they kept saying. 'We'll get at them one day.' And mark my word, they will. God is my witness—I'm ready to kiss the boots of any tsar. My hand wouldn't tremble to poke Lenin's and Trotski's eyes out with a rusty awl, if I could catch them—just as the moujiks gouged the eyes out of the factory stallions and the brood-mares on the country estates."

That autumn and winter everything was in turmoil, the town changed hands and there was some street fighting, but for Tolstoy and me life was more or less bearable, for every now and again we succeeded in selling things to the publishing firms which cropped up all over the south of Russia. In addition, Tolstoy received a decent salary from a gambling club of which he was the manager. This lasted till the beginning of April, when the Bolsheviki took Odessa and the French and Greek forces which had been sent to defend the town retreated in a panic. Tolstoy and his family fled with them to Constantinople and further. My wife and I did not succeed in leaving with them, and spent almost five months of unspeakable misery under the Bolsheviki, till we were liberated by Denikin's volunteers. At last, at the end of January, after we very nearly fell again into the hands of the Bolsheviki, we said good-bye to Russia for ever, and escaped through Turkey, Bulgaria and Serbia to France.

God alone knows how we managed to cross the Black Sea and reach Constantinople alive. We walked to the Odessa port on a wet, murky evening when the Bolsheviki were already entering the town, and had just enough time

to squeeze ourselves into the numberless crowd of refugees jamming the dilapidated little Greek ship *Patras*. We were four people: my wife and I, and the famous scientist Kondakov, a massive old man of about seventy-five, accompanied by a young woman who acted as his secretary and almost as his nurse. We sailed to Constantinople two full days in a snowstorm. The captain was a drunken Albanian who did not know the Black Sea, and if it had not been for a Russian sailor who happened to be on board, the *Patras* would certainly have gone to the bottom together with all her unfortunate passengers. We landed in Constantinople on an icy-cold evening, with snow and a piercing wind, and were immediately taken to a kind of shed for a shower "for disinfection". Constantinople was occupied by the Allies, and the order to go under the shower was given by a French doctor. But I shouted so loudly that Kondakov and I were *Immortels* (both he and I were members of the Russian Imperial Academy) that the doctor, instead of answering, "Well, so much the better, for in that case the shower cannot kill you", relented and let us go. After which we were, by somebody's order, thrown into a huge, roaring van, together with our pitiful belongings, rushed beyond Stamboul to the so-called "Fields of the dead" and left for the night in the empty ruins of an enormous Turkish house with all its windows out. We slept on the floor in complete darkness, and found out in the morning that the house had till recently been a home for lepers, who were guarded by a giant Negro. The next day we moved to Galata, into the building formerly occupied by the Russian consulate, where we slept on the floor again till our departure to Sofia.

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In the autumn of 1919, when I was still in Odessa, which was then occupied by Denikin's army, I received two letters from Tolstoy from Paris. He wrote:

"It was very sad last April to say good-bye to you. It was a bad time altogether. But we felt as though we were being carried away by a wind, and only came to our senses on board the ship. It would be impossible to tell you all we went through. We slept with the children in a damp hold, with typhus cases next to us, and lice crawling all over us. Then, for two months, we sat on the Dogs' Island in the Sea of Marmora. It was a beautiful spot, but we had no money. After that we sailed for three weeks in a ship where our cabin was flooded daily by water from the soldiers' lavatory. But all this is now being made up to us by Paris. We are so happy here that we would feel completely happy if we did not know that our families and friends are going through horror over there. . . ."

In the next letter he wrote:

"Dear Ivan Alexeyevich, Prince Lvov (the former head of the Provisional Government who is in Paris just now) spoke to me about you, asking me where you were and whether you would agree to the suggestion to be evacuated to Paris. I said that you probably would, if they could assure you a minimum income sufficient for two people. I think, dear Ivan Alexeyevich, that you would be well advised to accept the offer. The minimum income would be guaranteed. In addition, you will have at your disposal a periodical, the *Future Russia* (which has just started to come out in Paris), and another enormous publication of which I am the editor. You can also have your books published in Russian, in German and in

French. The main thing, however, is that you would live in this blessed, peaceful land where the red wine is wonderful and there is plenty of everything. If you decide to come, let me know in advance and I shall take, in Saint-Cloud or in Sèvres, a villa big enough for you and Vera Nikolaevna to live with us. It will be very, very nice. . . ."

The first letter also contained the following lines:

"Send me your books with your authorization to have them translated into French. I shall look after your interests and transfer you the money honestly, i.e. I won't pinch it. Here in Paris they are very keen to translate you, but we haven't got your books. . . . All this time I have been working over a novel, about eighteen to twenty sheets long. A third of it is done. On top of it I have earnings on the side, both honest and filthy, such as scenarios, for instance. France is an amazing, beautiful country with solid moral foundations, with good old traditions, and houses long and well lived in. . . . Whatever people say, there can never be any Bolsheviks here. . . . I embrace you warmly, dear Ivan Alexeyevich. . . ."

Constantinople, Bulgaria, Serbia, Czechoslovakia were at that time full of Russian refugees. So was Paris, where we arrived at the end of March, and where we were greeted not only by the joyful beauty of the Paris spring but also by innumerable Russians, including many people whose names were known not only throughout Russia but also in Europe: survivors of the Imperial family, millionaire business men, famous statesmen and politicians, deputies of the State Duma, writers, painters, journalists, musicians. In spite of everything, they still



believed in the revival of Russia and were excited by their life abroad and by the ever-growing activity which was developing in all fields. Whom did we not encounter in the first few years, almost daily at public meetings, gatherings of all kinds and in private houses! General Denikin, Prince Lvov, Kerenski, Maklakov, Stakhovich, Milukov, Struve, Guchkov, Nabokov, Savinkov, Burtzev, the composer Prokofiev, the painters Yakovlev, Malyavin, Sudeikin, Bakst, Shukhaev, the writers Merezhkovski, Kuprin, Aldanov, Tefly, Balmont. . . . Tolstoy had been quite right when he wrote to me in Odessa that one could not perish in Paris from inactivity and poverty. Financially we soon began to manage fairly well, and the Tolstoys even better. And how could it have been otherwise? Tolstoy, with whom I became particularly friendly at the time, arrived at my place one morning and said: "Let's make the round of the 'bourgeois' and collect some money. We, writers, must start our own publishing house. There are plenty of periodicals and newspapers in Paris willing to print us, but that is not enough: we must also have our books published." So we took a taxi, visited a few "bourgeois", explaining to each in a few words the purpose of our visit, and were received by all with the friendliest hospitality. In three or four hours we had collected one hundred and sixty thousand francs, which thirty years ago was quite a sum! We soon started the publishing firm, which further improved our financial position—and not only Tolstoy's and my own but that of many other writers as well. But the trouble with Tolstoy was that no amount of money was ever sufficient for him. He often said to me in Paris:

"My God, how well we live in every way! I've never lived like this in the whole of my life—only the accursed money vanishes extraordinarily quickly in all this muddle."

"What muddle?"

"I don't know! All I know is that I loathe empty pockets; to walk about in town and look at the shop windows without being able to buy anything is real torture for me. I'm passionately fond of buying things, be it even quite useless trash. Besides, we're five, you know, counting the Esthonian girl who looks after the children. So I have to wangle."

On one occasion I heard him say something quite different: "If I were very rich I'd be hellishly bored." But in the meantime wangling was imperative, and wangle he did. When he arrived in Paris he met an old Moscow friend by the name of Krandievski, a wealthy man, and with his help Tolstoy lived for some time and even got a considerable stock of clothes.

"I'm no fool," he told me, laughing. "I went and immediately bought myself some underwear and shoes. I have now six pairs of the best make, all on excellent shoe-trees. I ordered three suits, evening dress and two coats. I got some excellent hats too, for all seasons."

During the first years of our exile, in the hope of a Bolshevik collapse, some wealthy Russians in Paris and some banks were buying from the refugees various properties they had in Russia. So Tolstoy managed to sell for eighteen thousand francs his non-existent estate, and told me the story with his eyes popping out of his head:

"Isn't that idiotic? I had just given them a complete report with all the details—the exact acreage of the arable land, the forests, pastures and all that—when suddenly they asked me: 'But where is that estate of yours?' I began to panic like a son of a bitch, but luckily I suddenly remembered the comedy 'Old Days in Kashira' and said quickly: 'In the Kashira district, behind the village of Little Pants. . . .' And, thank God, they bought it."

In Paris Tolstoy and I became particularly close friends. We met very often, either in the houses of mutual friends, or Tolstoy would come to us with Natasha, or else he would send us little notes, such as the following:

"To-night we are having a bouillabaisse from Prunier and a bottle of Pouilly (ancient!) the like of which no one has ever tasted, four kinds of cheese, cutlets from Prunier, and Natasha and I are afraid that nobody will come. I beg you to be here at half-past seven."

"What about looking in to-night, with the Zetlins, to drink a glass of good old wine and admire the lights of this wonderful city, which can be seen so very far from our sixth floor? For the occasion, Natasha and I will cover the hall with new wallpaper."

But a year went by, then another, they found themselves more and more often short of money, and Tolstoy began to grumble:

"I simply can't think what to do next. I've grabbed all I could from everybody I could think of—thirty-seven thousand francs in all—'borrowed', of course, as one says between respectable people—and now they go pale when I turn up for dinner or to spend the evening, knowing that I'll go up to somebody at once and say in a strangled

voice: 'A thousand francs till Friday or I'll blow my brains out.' "

I had known Natasha since December 1903. One cold evening she came to me in Moscow, all covered with frost—her squirrel cap, the squirrel collar of her coat, her eyelashes, the corners of her mouth all white with it—and I was struck by her youthful beauty and her charm, and delighted with her talented poetry which she brought me to read. She went on writing it while she was married to her first husband and also later, after she married Tolstoy, but for some reason gave it up when they came to live in Paris. Like her husband, she abhorred poverty: "It is impossible to starve in Paris, I admit," she used to say, "but it's quite possible to walk about shabby and down-at-heel." I think that she played her part in Tolstoy's decision to go back to Russia.

However that may be, in the summer of 1921 Tolstoy gave no thought yet to the idea of any return to Russia. They spent that summer near Bordeaux, on a small estate that had been bought by the "Zemgor" with the remains of their funds. Tolstoy wrote to me from there:

"Dear friends, Ivan and Vera Nikolaevna, knowing what mistrustful people you are I realize it would be useless to assure you that I have been thinking of writing to you for a very long time, and kept putting it off for the sole reason that it seemed I would do it to-morrow. How are you getting on? It isn't too bad here, we eat better than in Paris, and for less than half the money. If we had a minimum of cash it would be paradise, even though rather dull. But we have no money at all, and if something very good doesn't happen by autumn it won't be

very good with us either. Dear Ivan, please write and tell me how our business is going. God won't send us death yet, so we must go creaking on. I write quite a lot, I've finished my novel and am now altering the end. It would be nice if you could come and spend the winter here in Cambes. The house is comfortable and we could live very well and cheaply. We could go up to Paris sometimes. Think it over and let me know."

But autumn came and nothing "very good" happened to the Tolstoys. And so one autumn evening, coming home, we found a card on which we read these words which were, in a way, fateful: "I came to read you my novel and to say good-bye."

The next letters came from Berlin. The following are extracts from them:

"16th November, 1921. Dear Ivan, we have arrived in Berlin. My God, how different everything is here! It is rather like Russia, and at any rate very near Russia. Life here is very much the same as in Kharkov under the Hetman's rule: the mark is falling, prices are soaring and goods are hiding. But there is, of course, one essential difference: there the whole life was built on sand, on politics, on adventure, with the revolution only painted on the surface, whilst here in the masses of the people one feels a calmness and a will to work. The Germans work as nobody else can. . . . There won't be any Bolshevism here, that is clear. The streets are covered with black snow, just as in Moscow at the end of November. Our boarding-house isn't bad, but you wouldn't like it. There is no wine at all, and that's a great privation, and all their beer does to you is send you off to sleep and make you

urinate. We shall stay here for a little while and then go off: Natasha and the children to Freiburg and I to Munich. Publishing is in full swing. All their marks are worth next to nothing, but if you live in Germany the earnings are not too bad. There is every sign that the publishers here have definite intentions to sell books in Russia. The spelling problem will, apparently, be decided in favour of the old. Soon, very soon we shall see better days. . . ."

"Saturday, 21 January, 1922. Dear Ivan, forgive my not answering you for such a long time, but having recently come back from Münster I got caught, as you will easily understand, in the vortex of social life. For that reason I kept putting off answering letters. I am surprised at the firmness with which you refuse to come to Germany. Why don't you do it on the money you got from your benefit night? This would be enough for you and your wife to spend nine months here in the best boarding-house in the best part of the town. You'd live like a prince with nothing to worry about. My family and I, though living separately just now, spend only thirteen to fourteen thousand marks a month, i.e. less than a thousand francs. If I get anything from the performance of my play, we shall be all right for the whole of the summer, i.e. the hardest months. In Paris we would be starving. The fees here are such that by work for periodicals alone I would not be able to keep the family, but books come to my assistance. But you two could live comfortably on just the fees by the line. . . . The book market here is very large and grows every month. Everything gets sold, even books that would have fallen flat in pre-war Russia.

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On top of it, there is a general hope that the market will expand even more through books pushing into Russia: some have already made their way there, even ordinary fiction, not to mention books with an 'appeasement' flavour. In short, there are by now thirty publishing firms in Berlin, all functioning to some extent. I embrace you. Yours A. Tolstoy."

One line in that letter is particularly significant: "If I get anything from the performance of my play, we shall be all right for the whole of the summer." It clearly shows that Tolstoy was not yet thinking of returning to Russia. However, that letter was the last he ever wrote to me.



How he came to prosper in Russia has been described many times by people who saw him in Petersburg, in Tsarskoye Selo and later, during the war, in Tashkent. A certain Madame Zavadsкая tells us about her visit in the winter of 1925 to Tolstoy's flat in Petersburg, where she went to change the dressing on his wife's broken leg. The door was opened, she tells us, by a big, heavily built man wearing a loose canvas blouse reaching below the knees, slippers on bare feet and enormous horn-rimmed glasses. It was a six-room flat. Tolstoy had two typewriters: on one of them he typed his novel, and on the other turned it immediately into a film script. The typewriters were covered with church palls, which are used on the altar for covering the chalice, and Tolstoy explained that he had taken them from the Winter Palace

church. He liked seeing beautiful things while he worked, he said; they inspired him. . . . Shortly before that he had written, together with Shegolev, a well-known literary historian, a play entitled "The Empress's Conspiracy". Its purpose was "to show the Russian people the crimes of the Tsar's house". The play depicted the whole family of the Tsar, their intimate life, Rasputin and the murder of Rasputin. The authors got three hundred thousand roubles each and rushed to buy up all they could lay their hands on. All the corners in Tolstoy's flat were crammed with paintings, lampstands and various trunks and boxes. That was how his wife broke her leg: by tripping over those trunks and boxes. They also bought up all they could in the food shops. . . . Later on Tolstoy got a private house on the outskirts of Petersburg.

We find similar stories in the diary of the late Victor Serge, the well-known revolutionary. He was Russian by birth and for some time was close to the Russian Bolsheviks, but was later disappointed in them. Victor Serge says that he often met Tolstoy (approximately at the same period as Zavadskaya). He went to several "famous dinners" in Shegolev's flat, at which Tolstoy was very often present. Shegolev and Tolstoy, says Serge, used to give those "banquets during the plague" in turns. Shegolev had adapted himself to the Bolsheviks as quickly as Tolstoy. Together with Tolstoy, he wrote an utterly indecent, libellous play about the Empress Alexandra Fedorovna. That play, as was to be expected, met with the full approval of the Krémelin. It had an extremely long run and brought its authors, according to Serge, millions of roubles in royalties. Other



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similar creations by Tolstoy and Shegolev were published in an enormous number of copies. Serge also visited Tolstoy in Tsarskoye Selo, where Tolstoy had a luxurious flat furnished with antiques of the Paul I period. Tolstoy not only treated his guests to rare foreign wines and delicacies but took them after dinner for a ride on troikas. At that time he was just finishing his novel, *Peter I*, which he wrote in such a way that Peter I appeared as Stalin's precursor and a model for Stalin's statesmanship.

To all this we can add what has been written about Tolstoy in German by the Warsaw painter Chapsky, who was on Anders's staff in Tashkent. Choosing a spot as far removed from military operations as possible, Tolstoy fled to Tashkent in the spring of 1942. He lived in a vast house surrounded by a shady garden, in the centre of the town. He had an enormous study and a drawing-room with a Bechstein piano. One evening, says Chapsky, they gathered round the table, which was full of expensive foreign wines and vases with rare candied fruit, and feasted till morning. During the war against the Germans Tolstoy wrote many patriotic articles for the newspapers in a sententious style: "The Russian people are good and fond of goodness." "The Red Army men have pure and austere souls", and so forth. It has been said about Tolstoy that he was a personal friend of Stalin's, and had Stalin in mind when he wrote not only *Peter I* but also the play about Ivan the Terrible. He was also said to be one of the wealthiest men in Russia and an insatiable collector of antiques. When the Russians took Vilno he bought up through an agent the wine cellars of the best hotels in the town. . . .

I met him for the last time quite accidentally in Paris, in November 1936. One evening I was sitting in a large, crowded café and he happened to be there too—he had arrived for some reason in Paris, where he had not been since his departure for Berlin and from there to Russia. He saw me from afar and sent me by a waiter a scrap of paper saying: "Ivan, I am here. Do you want to see me? A. Tolstoy." I got up, went in the direction to which the waiter had pointed, and saw him walking towards me. As soon as he came up to me he began to laugh his quacking laugh and muttered: "Can I kiss you? You're not afraid of a Bolshevik?" This was an open mockery of his own Bolshevism. With the same outspokenness he went on quickly, before we had sat down:

"I'm terribly glad to see you, and I want to ask you at once: how long will you remain sitting here, waiting to end your days in poverty? In Moscow they would greet you with church bells. You can't imagine how they love you, how much they read you in Russia. . . ."

I retorted jokingly:

"With church bells? How's that? I thought they were forbidden."

He muttered crossly, but with warm sincerity:

"Don't pick on words, please! Honestly, you can't imagine how well you'd live. Do you know the sort of life I have, for instance? I have a proper estate in Tsarskoye Selo, and three cars. . . . I have a better collection of rare English pipes than the King of England himself. . . . And what do you think—that your Nobel Prize will keep you for a hundred years?"

I hastily changed the subject.

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I stayed with him for a short while, for the friends I had come with were waiting for me, and he said he was flying to London the next day but would ring me in the morning and arrange to meet again. He did not ring, which was very like him, so that our meeting in the café turned out to be the last. In many ways he had changed: his big body had grown leaner, the hair had thinned, he wore large horn-rimmed spectacles instead of the former pince-nez, he did not drink—forbidden by the doctors—and all we had, sitting at his table, was a small glass of champagne each. . . . He died nine years later, in February 1945.

## Six Miniatures



### GOGOL AND PUSHKIN'S SON

**E**VEN AS a small boy I looked upon writers as creatures of some higher, exceptional order—and I remember how impressed I was by a story about Gogol which I heard from my tutor. This is what he told me:

"I actually saw him once. It happened in Moscow, in a house often visited by writers and artists. When he was pointed out to me I was spellbound, as though in the presence of something supernatural. Imagine seeing Gogol! I stared at him completely fascinated. He stood in the middle of a crowd of people, his head thrown back somewhat theatrically. I noticed that his trousers were uncommonly wide and his tail-coat very narrow. He was speaking about something and everybody listened with respectful attention. For my part I only caught one sentence—a long, well-rounded phrase about the laws that govern fantasy in literature. I cannot remember it exactly, but the gist of it was that one can write about an apple-tree with golden apples, but not about pears growing on a pussy-willow."

I can remember, too, the uncanny feeling I had when in my youth I once stood by the side of Pushkin's son in the church of the Strastnoi Monastery in Moscow. I

could not tear my eyes away from the small, spare, aged figure in the smart uniform of a general of the Hussars, from his white, curly hair and his very pale, exceedingly thin hands with their bony fingers and long, sharp nails.



## RACHMANINOV

ONE OF my dearest memories is meeting Rachmaninov in Yalta—for what took place between us then was something that seemed possible only in the romantic years of Herzen's and Turgenev's youth, when people were capable of talking entire nights on end about beauty and eternity and high art. In later years, up to the last time Rachmaninov left for America, we met occasionally, on very friendly terms, yet it was never the same again as that first meeting, when, having spent almost the whole night talking on the beach, he put his arms around me and said, "Let us always be friends."

Our life paths were too different, life separated us too often and our meetings were accidental and mostly short; also, as far as I remember, my great friend grew very reserved in his later years. Whereas that night in Yalta we were still young and anything but reserved. We felt close to each other almost from the first words we exchanged in the midst of a large crowd, gathered on some occasion, the reason for which I have now forgotten, for a gay supper in the Russia, the best hotel in Yalta.

We sat next to each other at table, drinking cham-

pagne "Abrau Durso", and then went out together on to the terrace, carrying on an animated conversation about the decline both in the prose and in the poetry of the Russian literature of those days. We hardly noticed how we walked across the yard of the hotel and found ourselves on the embankment, and then on the pier. It was late and there was nobody about. We sat down on some coiled ropes, breathing the smell of tar and the extraordinary freshness which is, I think, peculiar to the water of the Black Sea. We spoke and spoke, with growing warmth and joy, remembering all that was wonderful in Pushkin, Lermontov, Tutchew, Fet, Maikov. And he recited with deep feeling the poem by Maikov for which he was hoping to compose, or maybe had already composed, the music.

*At the appointed hour I waited in the grot  
But the day faded. . . .*



## THE PAINTER REPIN

THE PAINTERS I have known include the brothers Vassnetzov, Nesterov, and Ilya Repin. Because I was so thin Nesterov wanted me as a model for one of his saints, to be painted in his customary style. I was flattered, but declined: not everybody would agree to see himself in the form of a saint. Repin honoured me as well: once, when I went to Petersburg with my friend Nilus, the

painter, he invited me to visit him in his country house in Finland and sit for a portrait. "I hear from my fellow painters," he wrote, "I hear the happy news of the arrival of Nilus, that excellent artist—ah, if only I had his colours! And what is more—he has arrived with you, the excellent writer whose portrait I dream of painting. Come here, my dear fellow, and we'll talk it over and sit down to work." I hastened to accept his invitation: it was a great honour to have one's portrait painted by such a famous artist. But what did I find when I arrived?

A wonderful morning, with sunshine and sharp frost; the yard covered with deep snow; and in the house—all the windows thrown wide open, for Repin at that time had a craze for vegetarianism and fresh air. He came out to meet me wearing high felt boots, a fur coat and a fur cap. He embraced me and kissed me, then led me to his studio where the cold was the same as outside, and said:

"This is where I'll paint your portrait every morning, and after that we'll have the kind of lunch that God has ordained: a little grass, my dear fellow, a little grass. You'll see how it cleanses body and soul. And soon you'll even give up your accursed tobacco."

I began bowing low, thanking him fervently and muttering that I would come to-morrow without fail, but that just now I simply had to hurry back to the station: terribly urgent business in Petersburg and so forth. Whereupon I embraced my host again and ran to the station as fast as my legs would carry me; there I made a dash for the buffet, gulped down a glass of vodka, took an avid puff at my cigarette, and jumped into the train. The next day I sent him a telegram from Petersburg:

"Dear Ilya Efimovich am in complete despair am summoned urgently to Moscow leaving by next train. . . ."

That was the end of my business with Repin.



## JEROME K. JEROME

IS THERE a Russian who has not read Jerome K. Jerome? I do not think so. But I doubt whether many Russians can boast of having known him. Two or three, perhaps—and I am among those.

I have been to England only once. In the course of my life I have travelled a great deal, but mainly south or east. Somehow I was always a little frightened of the north. This was true of England as well, with its fogs and rain. Now I would be quite willing to go north, but it needs a bit of luck for an émigré to go abroad. And I had that bit of luck in 1926, when the London P.E.N. Club had the idea of inviting me to spend a few days in London and organizing a literary banquet to introduce me to some English writers and members of English society. The club undertook to look after my visa and expenses. And so I arrived in London.

I was taken round to very different houses, some ultra-modern, some old-fashioned, but in each one it seemed to be my fate to find myself in a situation quite worthy of a story by Jerome K. Jerome (the dinners alone were good enough!). Towards the end of my stay I was invited to a party together with many members of the aristocracy.



The party was lively and pleasant, but so crowded that the rooms became too hot, and the kind hosts all of a sudden threw all the windows wide open, regardless of the snow falling outside. I pretended to be terrified and with a yell rushed up the stairs to find refuge on the upper floor where there were also many guests, when I heard delighted exclamations behind me: Jerome K. Jerome had unexpectedly turned up.

He slowly mounted the stairs and slowly walked into the room, the crowd respectfully making way for him. As he greeted the people he knew he glanced inquiringly around him. It turned out that he had come specially to meet me, and we were introduced. He stretched out his large fat hand in an old-fashioned sort of way, rather as peasants do, and looked at me fixedly with his small blue eyes which gleamed with a bright, merry spark.

"I'm very, very glad to meet you," he said. "I live like a baby now—never out at night, bedybyes by ten—but tonight I felt I must break the rule and come here for a few moments to see what you were like and to shake your hand."

He was a thick-set, stocky, very strong old man with a broad, red, clean-shaven face, a long and ample frock-coat and a starched shirt with a turn-down collar and a modestly narrow black tie—a true to type old-world shopkeeper or clergyman.

He went very soon afterwards and left me with a lasting impression of a very pleasant and fine person, but certainly not of a writer of world repute.



## PRINCE KROPOTKIN

IN THE Larousse dictionary it says: "Prince Pierre Kropotkine, révolutionnaire russe, théoricien de l'anarchie, né à Moscou (1842-1921)."

Kropotkin belonged to an eminent aristocratic family. As a young courtier he was on intimate terms with the Emperor Alexander II. Later on he emigrated to England, where he remained up to the February Revolution of 1917, when he returned to Moscow. I met him then for the first time, and was very surprised and moved: the man of European fame, the friend of Elysée Reclus turned out to be a little old man with pink cheeks, with thin white hair light as fluff, vivacious and irresistibly charming, childishly naive, and very friendly in his speech and manner. Clear, lively eyes, a kindly, trustful look, an upper-class, soft, rapid speech—and that endearing childishness. . . .

He was then greatly esteemed and very well looked after. He, the revolutionary—although a very peaceful one—who had returned to his country after so many years of exile, was the pride of the revolution which had at last liberated Russia from tsarism. A house in one of the best parts of Moscow—I do not remember exactly to whom it had belonged—was placed at his disposal. Towards the end of the year meetings were organized in that house "for the purpose of discussing the question of the creation of a League of Federalists". What Russia was going through in those days, the end of 1917! And yet Russian intellectuals gathered and formed "Leagues"

in the bloody madhouse which their country had already become. What happened next was the following.

In March 1918 the Bolsheviks drove Kropotkin out of the house, which they requisitioned for their own use. He meekly moved out to some flat, from where he persistently tried to get an interview with Lenin, in the singularly innocent hope that he would bring him to repent for the monstrous terror which was already sweeping through Russia. At long last the interview was granted. For some unknown reason Kropotkin was "on friendly terms" with Bonch-Bruyevich, a close associate of Lenin's, and it was in Bonch-Bruyevich's flat in the Kremlin that the meeting took place. It seems incredible that a man like Kropotkin should have been "on friendly terms" with someone who stood out even among the Bolsheviks as an exceptional blackguard—and yet he was! And even more incredible: he actually attempted to direct Lenin's activities on to "a humanitarian path". Having failed in this, he was "disappointed" in Lenin and spoke about the interview with childish bewilderment:

"I found that it was utterly useless to try and convince that man of anything. I reproached him for having allowed two and a half thousand people to be murdered in reprisal for the attempt upon his life, but I realized that it made no impression upon him. . . ."

Later on, when the Bolsheviks drove the anarchist prince out of his flat as well, he "realized" that he must leave Moscow for the little provincial town of Dmitrov, to live there in cave-like conditions which no anarchist had ever dreamed of. There he ended his days, after going

through a million torments: the torment of hunger, the torment of scurvy, the torment of cold, the torment of anxiety for the old princess, his wife, who was breaking down under the strain of the ceaseless struggle for a piece of mouldy bread. The little old man longed for a pair of felt boots, but never managed to get any. He only wasted several months on trying to obtain a licence for purchasing them. He spent his evenings by the light of a torch, finishing his posthumous work, *On Ethics*. Can one imagine anything more horrible? Nearly the whole of his life—the life of a man who once had been a close friend of the Emperor—had been wasted on revolutionary dreams of an anarchistic paradise (that among beings who are only just learning to walk on their hind paws properly!), and ended in hunger and cold, by the dim light of a smoky torch, in the very midst of the long-awaited revolution, over a manuscript on human ethics!



## MAYAKOVSKI

AT THE beginning of April, in the days of Lenin's arrival from abroad, I went to Petersburg for the last time—the very last time in my life—and happened to attend at the opening of an exhibition of Finnish painters. All Petersburg was there. I saw the ministers of the Provisional Government and prominent deputies of the already non-existent State Duma. I listened to hysterically servile speeches addressed to the Finns.

To crown it all there was a banquet. And how significantly all that I witnessed then in Petersburg linked up with the outrageous farce into which that banquet developed! The "flower of the Russian intelligentsia" was there to a man: famous painters, actors, writers, ministers, deputies, and one high foreign diplomat, namely the French Ambassador. Soaring above them all was the so-called poet Mayakovski, who had acquired a certain fame together with a few other versifying hooligans who called themselves "futurists" for purposes of notoriety. These futurists wrote intentional mumbo-jumbo and read it in public, mounting on the platform dressed up in yellow women's blouses, with faces painted like those of some savage tribe and swearing at the audience in the foulest language in reply to its catcalls and laughter. I sat at supper with Gorki and the Finnish painter Axel Gallen, and Mayakovski began his performance by suddenly coming up to us, pushing a chair between ours and helping himself from our plates and drinking out of our glasses. Gallen stared at him spell-bound, just as he would probably have stared if a horse had been led into the banquet hall. Gorki roared with laughter; I drew away.

"You hate me, don't you?" Mayakovski asked me gaily.

I replied that I didn't, "it would be too great an honour".

He opened his huge mouth to say something else, but at that moment Milukov, our Foreign Minister at the time, rose for an official toast and Mayakovski dashed towards him, to the centre of the table, jumped on a chair

and shouted something so obscene that Milukov was completely flabbergasted. After a moment, regaining his control, he tried to start his speech again, "Ladies and gentlemen . . ." but Mayakovski yelled louder than ever, and Milukov shrugged his shoulders and sat down. Then the French Ambassador rose to his feet. He was obviously convinced that the Russian hooligan would give in to him. What a hope! His voice was drowned by a deafening bellow from Mayakovski. But this was not all. A wild and senseless pandemonium broke out. Mayakovski supporters also began to yell, pounding their feet on the floor and their fists on the tables. They screamed with laughter, whined, squeaked, snorted. But suddenly all this was quashed by a truly tragic wail of one of the Finns, a painter, who looked like a clean-shaven sea-lion. Rather drunk, pale as death, he had obviously been shaken to the core by this excess of misbehaviour, and started to shout at the top of his voice, literally with tears in his eyes, one of the few Russian words he knew:

*"Mnogo! Mno-go! Mno-go!"* ("many" or "much").

The one-eyed cave-man Polyphemus had intended to eat Odysseus, who encountered him in his travels. When Mayakovski was still at school he had been prophetically nicknamed Idiot Polyphemovich (son of Polyphemus). Mayakovski and his "comrades" were also gluttonous, and very strong because of their complete uniformity. For a time, at the beginning of the revolution, they seemed to be no more than clowns at a fair. But it was not for nothing that they called themselves futurists, i.e. men of the future: they scented in the air that the Polyphemian, barbaric future belonged undoubtedly to them, and that

they would gag all the other orators once and for all, even more successfully than they had done at the banquet in honour of Finland.

*Mnogo*—much—many. Yes, fate has put us in the way of far too many “great” historical events. I was born too late. Had I been born earlier, how different my memoirs would have been! I would not have lived through all that is irrevocably linked with them: the first, minor Russian revolution of 1905, the first world war, the fatal 1917 with all that followed, and finally almost six years of Hitler. How can we help envying grandfather Noah? All he went through was just one flood. And what a solid, cosy ark, and what abundant food supplies: seven pairs of pure and two pairs of impure but nevertheless very edible animals. And the messenger of peace and goodwill, the dove with the olive branch in its beak, did not betray him—unlike the present doves of “comrade” Picasso. And all went smoothly with his landing on Ararat, where he found something good to eat and drink, and went to sleep the sleep of the just under a warm, clear sun, in the fresh air of a new spring, in a world cleansed of all antediluvian evil—unlike our world, returned to antediluvian times.

We, who have gone through several floods, are still, for over thirty years now, enduring the torments of exile, having lost not only all that we possessed in Russia but almost all our friends and relatives who remained there and who were either shot or died of starvation and disease—for there were years in this so-called “Soviet” Russia when people fed on corpses, while the Mayakovskis revelled in luxury and fame. The “poet” Mayakovski,

who before the revolution paraded in the streets with a painted snout and published books with titles such as *The Cloud in Trousers*, abandoned all that scandalous behaviour when Lenin came to power, to start on scandalous behaviour of another sort: he became a revolutionary demagogue, a fiery bard of communism and red terror, exhorting Russian youths to "build their lives on the Dzerzhinski pattern" (Dzerzhinski who under Lenin became the head of the All-Russian Cheka, now called N.K.V.D., was a merciless killer and shot tens of thousands of people whom he suspected of counter-revolution, even though Gorki assured us that he had "a golden heart"). Mayakovski shot himself in 1931, explaining in a note that his "love-boat had grounded", but in the meantime he had got into such good graces with the Kremlin that they put up a monument to him in Moscow, and named the Tverskoi Square and an underground station after him.

In the last years of his life he wore only silk underwear, travelled to America and Paris, poured mud over the capitalist system, but frequented in Paris only such restaurants as *Bœuf sur le Toit*, and in his unwieldy verses described Parisian women very contemptuously, like the blasé fop and snob that he was: "I do not like Parisian love; you can adorn any female with silk, but I'll still yawn and go to sleep, saying, 'Be quiet' to the dogs of passion."

He despised everything in the world except Stalin and the Russian Communist Party. One of his favourite words was "spittle"; he called the stars "little spittles"; and describing his trip to the Caucasus he informed us that



MAYAKOVSKI

he spat first into the Terek, then into the Aragva. . . . His worst insults, however, were reserved for America, where, according to him, children suck their mother's breast "as they would suck a'dollar", and always "with a dripping nose". . . .

## The Nobel Days



### I

THE 9TH of November 1933. Good old Provence, good old Grasse where I spent ten years of my life almost without interruption, a quiet, warm, grey day of the late autumn. . . .

On days like that I never felt inclined to work. Nevertheless, I sat at my desk from early morning as usual. I returned to it again after lunch. But when I looked out of the window and saw that it was going to rain, I said to myself: "No, I can't go on working. There's an afternoon performance at the cinema to-day. I'll go to the cinema."

As I walked down the hill on which stood Belvédère, I looked at Cannes lying in the distance, at the sea barely visible on such days, at the misty crest of the Esterel, and caught myself thinking:

"Maybe at this very moment, at the other end of Europe, my fate is being decided. . . ."

But at the cinema I forgot all about Stockholm.

When after the interval a gay little piece of nonsense, entitled *Baby*, came on the screen, I watched it with particular interest: Kisa, the pretty daughter of Kuprin, was playing in it. But suddenly I heard a cautious rustle beside me, a torch flashed in the dark, I felt a hand on my

shoulder and heard a voice whisper into my ear with a mixture of awe and excitement:

"A telephone call from Stockholm."

At that moment the whole of my life was changed.

I walked home rather fast, but experienced nothing except a feeling of regret at not having seen Kisa's acting to the end, and a kind of dull mistrust towards the news that had been communicated to me. And yet—no, it was impossible not to believe it: I saw from afar that my house, always quiet and dark in that season, lost in the vast olive groves covering the mountain slopes over Grasse, was brightly illuminated from top to bottom. My heart contracted with a strange sadness. A kind of break had come into my life. . . .

All evening Belvédère was filled with the ringing of the telephone, out of which distant voices shouted to me in different languages from nearly all the capitals of Europe, with the incessant tinkling of the door-bell announcing more and more telegrams of congratulations from nearly all the countries in the world—with the exception of Russia—and with a throng of various callers, photographers and journalists. . . . The visitors, whose number grew continually (so that their faces blurred before my eyes), shook my hand, hurriedly and excitedly repeating the same thing over and over again, and the photographers blinded me with magnesium flashes, to scatter the world over the picture of a pale-faced madman. The reporters, interrupting one another, bombarded me with questions:

"When did you leave Russia?"

"I've been an émigré since the beginning of 1920."

"Are you thinking of going back?"

MEMORIES AND PORTRAITS

"My God, how could I think of going back?"

"Is it true that you are the first Russian writer who has ever received the Nobel Prize?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Is it true that it was offered to Leo Tolstoy and that he refused to accept it?"

"No, it's not true. The prize is never 'offered' to anyone. The awards are decided in complete secrecy."

"Do you know anybody at the Swedish Academy?"

"I don't, and never did."

"For which of your books in particular has the prize been awarded to you?"

"I assume it is for my work as a whole."

"Did you expect to win it?"

"I knew that I was among the candidates considered for some time. I also read some flattering reviews about my work by well-known Scandinavian critics, such as Böök, Osterling, Agrell; and having heard about their connection with the Swedish Academy, I assumed that they would be favourably disposed to me. But, of course, I was not sure of anything."

"When are the Nobel Prizes usually awarded?"

"Every year at the same date: December the 10th."

"So you will be in Stockholm on that date?"

"Most likely even earlier. I am impatient to enjoy the pleasure of a distant journey as soon as possible. Owing to our émigré position, our disfranchisement, so to speak, and the resulting difficulty in obtaining visas, I have not been abroad, that is outside France, for over thirteen years. For me, who travelled endlessly the world over, this has been one of the worst privations."

"Have you ever been to any of the Scandinavian countries?"

"No, never. As I have just said, I've travelled a great deal, but mainly in the east and in the south. The north I kept postponing to a future date, which never came. . . ."

So I found myself swept away as though by an impetuous torrent. In addition to all the excitement that usually surrounds a winner of the Nobel Prize, my situation was exceptional in so far as I belonged to old Russia, which was now scattered all over the world—so that the Stockholm award became for all that exiled, humiliated and downtrodden Russia an event of truly national importance.

## II

The Nobel prize-giving celebrations begin every year on December the 10th, at five o'clock in the afternoon.

That morning I was woken up early by a knock on the door. The northern dawn was only beginning to break. The street lamps were still burning on the canal embankment, which I could see from my windows. The part of Stockholm rising above the canal, in front of me, with all its towers, churches and palaces which reminded me of Petersburg, stood in the eerie loveliness it had only at sunset and at dawn. My day was to begin early: it was the 10th of December, the anniversary of the death of Alfred Nobel, and that morning, according to ritual, I had to put on a top-hat and go to the cemetery outside the town, to place a wreath on his grave.

The official invitations to the ceremony, drawn up with

the meticulous precision which distinguishes all Swedish ritual, are sent to the prize-winners several days in advance. In Sweden it is considered inadmissible to be late even by one minute, or arrive a few minutes too early to any appointment. Consequently, I began getting myself ready at about three o'clock, for fear that something might happen: what if, for example, one of the shirt studs that go with tails should disappear at the last moment, as all the shirt studs in the world are apt to do on similar occasions?

At half-past four we left.

The town was illuminated with particular brightness—partly in our honour, and partly because of the approaching Christmas and New Year. Such a thick, endless stream of cars was flowing towards the enormous concert hall where the ceremony took place that our chauffeur, a young giant wearing a shaggy fur cap, had the greatest difficulty in making his way through it.

We, the prize-winners, entered the concert hall together with the crowd, but were separated from it as soon as we were in the vestibule, and led away through some separate passages, so that I know only from other people's accounts what happened in the gala hall before our appearance on the platform.

The hall was of amazing height and vastness. That day it was decorated from top to bottom with flowers, and filled to capacity with a dense crowd: hundreds of women in evening dresses, diamonds and pearls, men in tails, with decorations, stars, multi-coloured ribbons and other signs of distinction. At ten minutes to five the whole Swedish Cabinet, the diplomatic corps, the members of

the Swedish Academy and of the Nobel Committee were in their places and observed a complete silence. At precisely five o'clock the fanfares of the heralds proclaimed from the platform the appearance of the monarch. The fanfares gave way to the beautiful sounds of the national anthem flowing out from somewhere above, and the King entered the hall, accompanied by the Crown Prince and all the other members of the royal family, and followed by the King's retinue and all the members of the Court. We, the four prize-winners, were at that time in the small hall adjoining the back entrance to the platform.

Now was the moment for our entrance. The fanfares resounded again and we went in, following the Swedish academicians who were to introduce us. I, who was to make the first speech at the banquet which takes place after the ceremony, now, according to the ritual, was last to come out on the platform. I was introduced by Per Hallstrom, the permanent secretary of the Academy. As I entered I was dazzled by the brilliance of the enormous, crowded hall, by all that gulf of light and splendour which opened up before me.

The platform itself was immense, and decorated with fresh rose-coloured little flowers. Its right-hand part was occupied by the chairs of the academicians. Four chairs in the front row were reserved for the prize-winners. Above all this, solemn and immobile, the colours of the Swedish flag hung down the walls. As a rule the platform is decorated with the flags of the countries to which the prize-winners belong—but what flag had I, an émigré? The impossibility to display for me the flag of Soviet Russia made the organizers of the ceremony confine

themselves to one flag only—the Swedish one. A noble thought.

The meeting was opened by the president of the Nobel Fund. He greeted the King and the four prize-winners, and was followed by the first speaker, who devoted his entire speech to the memory of Alfred Nobel, for that year was the centenary of his birth. The speakers who followed gave an outline of the work and personality of the prize-winners, who were then invited to step off the platform and accept from the hands of the King a portfolio with the Nobel diploma and a case containing a large golden medal, engraved on one side with the profile of Alfred Nobel and on the other with the name of the recipient. In the intervals the orchestra played music by Beethoven and Grieg.

When Per Hallstrom finished his speech about me I was deeply moved. His speech was not only excellent but had sincere warmth. At the end of it he addressed me with charming ceremoniousness in French:

“Ivan Alexeyevich Bounine, voulez-vous descendre dans la salle pour recevoir des mains de Sa Majesté le prix Nobel de littérature 1933 que l’Académie Suédoise vous a décerné?”

In the deep silence that fell after that I slowly walked along the platform and down the steps, towards the King, who rose and waited for me. The entire audience also rose to their feet and held their breath to hear what he would say to me and what I would reply. He greeted me and in my person Russian literature as a whole, pressing my hand very firmly, with particular benevolence. With a low bow, I replied: “Sire, je prie Votre Majesté de



daigner accepter l'hommage de ma profonde et respectueuse gratitude." My words were drowned in applause.

The day after the prize-giving ceremony the King gives a dinner in his palace in honour of the recipients of the awards. On the evening of the 10th of December, almost immediately after the ceremony, they are taken to a banquet organized by the Nobel Committee.

When we arrived we found again the members of the Academy, the entire retinue and Court, the diplomatic corps, the artistic world of Stockholm and all the other guests assembled there. The Crown Prince and my wife, who were the first couple to go to the table, sat at the centre of it.

My place was next to Princess Ingrid, who has since become the Queen of Denmark; opposite us was Prince Eugene, the brother of the King (and, incidentally, a well-known painter).

The Crown Prince inaugurated the speeches. He spoke brilliantly, devoting his speech to the memory of Alfred Nobel. Then came the turn of the prize-winners.

The Prince spoke from his seat, but we went to a rostrum set up at the back of the vast hall, built in the old Swedish style. A loudspeaker carried our words through the whole of Europe.

The following is the exact text of my speech, which I made in French:

*"On the 9th of November, far away from here, in an old Provençal town, in a humble country house, I received the telephone call announcing the choice of the Academy of Sweden. I would not be altogether sincere were I to tell you,*

*as is often said in similar cases, that it was the most moving moment of my life. A great philosopher once said, that the emotions aroused by joy, even the most violent ones, count for next to nothing beside those caused by grief. Without wishing to bring a note of sadness to this banquet, of which I shall always retain an ineffable memory, I shall yet beg leave to state that my sorrows have largely exceeded my joys during these past fifteen years. And these sorrows have not all been of a personal nature, far from it!*

*"But I can most certainly assure you that of all the joys which have fallen to me in my literary life, that little technical miracle, that telephone call from Stockholm to Grasse, gave me the most justified pleasure. The literary prize founded by your great compatriot Alfred Nobel remains the highest award which can crown a writer's career. Ambitious as nearly all men and certainly all authors, I was exceedingly proud to receive this crown from the most impartial and able of juries, and also, you may be sure, gentlemen of the Academy, extremely grateful. But I would have displayed a sorry conceit if, on that 9th of November, I had thought only of myself. Exhausted by emotion over the congratulations and telegrams which were beginning to pour in, I thought, in the silence and solitude of the night, of the profound significance attached to this Academy's decision. For the first time since the foundation of the Nobel Prize, you have bestowed it on an exile. For what in truth am I? An exile who enjoys the hospitality of France, towards which I have equally contracted a debt of eternal gratitude. Gentlemen of the Academy, I should like to declare here and now that, leaving myself and my work out of consideration, your gesture is in itself a remarkably fine one. Indeed, it is vital for the world that there should be a few centres*

*of absolute independence. Doubtless around this table there are representatives of every opinion, of every philosophical and religious creed. But one truth unites us all: freedom of thought and conscience. To this freedom we are dedicated by civilization. And therein lies an axiom, a dogma, for us writers above all. Your decision, gentlemen of the Academy, proves once more that love of freedom is in Sweden a true national cult.*

*"And now a few words to end my little speech. I did not wait for this day to experience the deep admiration I feel for your royal family, your people and your literature. Love of art and letters is traditional in the royal house of Sweden, as in all your noble nation. Founded by an illustrious warrior, the Swedish dynasty is one of the most glorious in the world. His Majesty the King, that chivalrous monarch of a chivalrous people, will, I know, permit a foreigner, a free writer honoured by the Academy of Sweden, to offer him the expression of his most humble and devoted respects."*

Also by Ivan Bunin

## DARK AVENUES

*Translated from the Russian by Richard Hare*

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